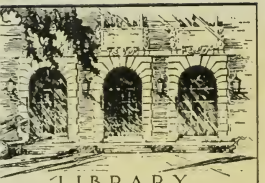
HER TWO MILLIONS

A Story of a Fortune

WILLIAM WESTALL



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HER TWO MILLIONS.

BY

WILLIAM WESTALL,

Author of

"RED RYVINGTON," "THE PHANTOM CITY," "TWO PINCHES OF SNUFF," etc.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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HER TWO MILLIONS.

CHAPTER I.

VERA IN LONDON.

When Vera gave Georgette Senarclens an account of her new home, she mentioned among other things that Monsieur and Madame Leyton were very religious, that they had prayers four or five times a day, by which she meant grace before meat, and morning and evening family worship. But this inference though natural—Vera having arrived on a Saturday evening and retired early—was mistaken, the practice in question being confined to Sundays, for Sir James was a firm believer in the conventional theory that by strict attention to his religious duties on the first day of the week a man may compound with heaven for over-worldliness and, perhaps, a little sharp practice in business, on the other six.

Lady Leyton, like her husband, was strictly orthodox, and except when the weather was too hot, or too wet, or too cold, or she did not feel quite strong, an assiduous churchgoer. On the Sunday

after her arrival Vera, as in duty bound, accompanied her hostess to morning service, and her ladyship was gratified to see that she paid great attention and listened with seeming interest to Mr. Softly's interesting sermon, in which he sharply rebuked the sin of discontent and showed that everybody had very much to be thankful for. Lady Leyton said she quite agreed with him, and when they were comfortably seated in the brougham asked Vera how she liked "our Anglican ritual."

"Very much," said Vera, not quite knowing what "Anglican ritual" meant, but making a shrewd guess; "the singing was beautiful, and the church is a very fine building. But I thought it was a Protestant church, Lady Leyton."

"So it is. Why should you think it is not?"

"I was once in a Catholic church at Sion, and they seem so much alike.

"Well, the service at St. Saviour's is very musical, if that is what you mean. But we are Protestants, all the same—the Church of England, you know. You shall read the Thirty-Nine Articles, and you will see for yourself. Were you never in an English church before?"

"Never."

"Then you were brought up as a Dissenter. I am sorry for that. I don't like Dissent."

"I do not know what you mean by Dissent," said Vera looking puzzled. "I think you would like the

church to which I went when I was at school—there is not much church-going at La Boissière—a Calvinistic church."

"Precisely. It is not an Episcopal church. You had no bishops, I mean."

"No," said Vera smiling. "We had no bishops."

"Then it must be as I say," returned Lady Leyton positively. "You have been brought up as a Dissenter. The church you attended was not an Established Church."

"I beg your pardon," said Vera, now beginning to understand what Lady Leyton was driving at, "it is an Established Church—the public church at Canton Vaud."

"And it is Calvinistic?"

"It is Calvinistic."

"Dear me, how very strange! In Canton Vaud, then, I should be a Dissenter. However, that is no reason why you should be a Dissenter here, my dear. You must be instructed. After luncheon you shall read the Thirty-Nine Articles, and I will lend you a little book which I am sure you will like. It is called 'Our Church.' You will find its teachings quite in accordance with the New Testament."

So Vera spent the afternoon in reading the Thirty-Nine Articles and the New Testament. She had not opened a Bible since she left school, and then only as a class book, and she found much in its pages that touched both her conscience and her

heart. She came to its perusal with a fresh mind, it took her out of herself, strengthened her good resolutions, and re-kindled that reverence for the character of Christ which she had felt in her childhood when her father told her the story of His sufferings and His death, for Philip Hardy was a revolutionist of the type of Mazzini, not of Proudhon. In the teaching of Christ and His disciples Vera saw a striking resemblance to much that she had heard from M. Senarclens, and albeit the historian was no believer in external religion, it seemed to her that both in his principles and his life he came much nearer to the Christian ideal than the respectable Protestants among whom her lot was now cast. She wondered what the Rev. Mr. Softly (who as Lady Leyton had told her, was very popular in society) would make of such passages as, "If thou wouldst be perfect sell all that thou hast and give it to the poor," and "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world," and what would have been made of them by a preacher of the Primitive Church.

But whatever might be the shortcomings of the knight and his lady in the matter of religion, they treated her with all kindness and consideration. Of Sir James she saw but little. Lady Leyton seemed to like her company, and let her have very much of

her own way. As the days went on, moreover, the strangeness of things wore off and she fell unconsciously into the ways of her new home. The servility of the servants troubled her less and less, the profusion and waste that had at first given her so much pain began to appear almost natural. London she liked much. The bustle, the immensity, and the variety of the vast city delighted as much as they amazed her. The National Gallery, which Lady Leyton took her to see, was a fresh world to her—an earthly Paradise. The theatre was another. Never before had Vera seen a great art collection or been present at a play. She could have spent all her days at the one, all her nights at the other. Then there were other diversions. Mrs. Reginald Leyton (the elder son's wife) had her down at Richmond, took her to boating and garden parties, introduced her to her friends, and made much of the beautiful heiress. When Vera returned to town there were drives in the Park, visiting and receiving visits; Lady Leyton took her for a few days to Hastings, and Vera wandered for the first time on the sea-shore, and listened to the music of the waves. When she had time she painted, and several hours every week she worked in the studio of a celebrated artist. It was only occasionally that she gave a thought to Switzerland and M. Senarclens, but always when she did so her conscience accused her; she owned to herself that she was in danger of

forgetting the noble lessons her friend had taught her, and proving recreant to the cause in which he had once welcomed her as a promising recruit. So far from devoting herself to the reform of society and the redemption of the disinherited, she did nothing but amuse herself and was fast becoming as selfishly *bourgeoise* as Lady Leyton, who had hardly a thought that did not centre in her family or herself. At such times as these Vera would resolve to take an entirely new departure, to go amongst the poor or do something equally heroic on the very next day; but the morrow brought so many distractions, diversions, and amusements, that it seemed impossible to carry her design into effect. It was either her painting lesson or her singing lesson, or tickets had been taken for the opera or some new play, or she had agreed to go out for a drive, or accepted an invitation to afternoon tea, and her good resolutions were forgotten almost as fast as they were formed. In other words, she was only a girl. M. Senarclens had not succeeded in turning her either into a socialist philosopher or a fanatical philanthropist.

Yet Vera had neither forgotten Balmaine nor her promise to see Cora, but she could not recall the latter's address, and for some reason for which she was unable to account or hesitated to acknowledge, even to herself, she delayed for a long while asking Alfred a second time where his cousin was to be found. At length she mustered up courage to write

to him; and in due course came the answer, very polite and proper, altogether *comme il faut*, yet disappointing. It seemed to lack something. He wrote without warmth, said very little about her, and hardly anything about himself. She threw the letter from her with a sense of annoyance and irritation, and then felt vexed at her own annoyance. Why should she feel annoyed? What difference did it make to her how he wrote? Then she took up the letter and read it again. He was glad to hear that she was well and enjoying herself, and that she liked London, and he felt quite sure that his cousin (whose address he enclosed) would be delighted to see her. That was all, and there could not easily have been less. Vera little knew what severe restraint Balmaine had put upon himself in writing that letter—how hard he had found it to write so formally and coldly; how, looking upon his love as foolishness and herself as hopelessly beyond his reach, he was resolved to give his passion nothing to feed upon, and to treat her—and so far as possible think of her—as no more than a mere acquaintance.

"Perhaps," she soliloquised, after a long reverie, in the course of which she more than once decided not to go near Cora, "he is in low spirits or indifferent health. I will see his cousin."

So the next day she wrote to Cora, asking when it would be convenient for the latter to receive her.

Cora, in a very cordial letter, named an hour at which she was nearly always at home. When Vera told Lady Leyton that she was going to call on a friend in Bloomsbury Square, her ladyship offered her the brougham, but doubting whether it would be kind, and feeling sure that it would be in bad taste to flaunt a fine equipage in the face of a poor friend, Vera declined the offer, rather to her hostess's surprise. Taking Gabrielle as an escort, she went by omnibus. She pleased Cora and Cora pleased her, and they were not long in making friends. They naturally talked a good deal about Alfred, and if his ears did not burn that day they ought to have done, for the two young women praised him to the skies, the one for his goodness to his mother and herself, and his high qualities generally, the other for his exertions in finding her, his disinterestedness in refusing reward, and his wise and kindly counsel.

While they were talking, a lady of some thirty years old, wearing a widow's cap, entered the room. Cora introduced her as Mrs. Maitland (she had lately lost her husband), her kinswoman, and the lady of the house. Though this lady's features were plain, she had gifts more precious than beauty—a winning smile, a gracious manner, and, as Vera thought, the most beautiful eyes she had ever beheld. Mrs. Maitland was a good soul, full of love for her fellow-creatures, and she spent nearly all

her time in visiting the poor, and the greater part of her modest income in relieving their wants.

"I must warn you that Mrs. Maitland is a terrible beggar," said Cora, smiling; "she is always wanting money for the poor, and begs of everybody she knows."

"You exaggerate, my dear. I beg of nobody I meet for the first time, unless I am out on a regular begging expedition, and not even then unless I have reason to believe they can afford something."

"I am sure I shall be only too glad to give what I can," said Vera, eagerly. "In two or three years I shall have my money, I shall be rich, and then I will give you as much as you want. But I should like to do something—to work, I mean. There is nothing so easy as being generous when your grandfather leaves you a fortune."

"Perhaps you would like to go with me on one of my rounds, Miss Hardy?" answered Mrs. Maitland; "and then you would see where the poor of London live, and how they live."

Vera declared that this was what she had wanted to do for a long time, and it was arranged that on the following Thursday they should visit in company Mrs. Maitland's district in the East.

"You have no idea how much I envy you, Miss Balmaine," said Vera, as she was taking leave of her newly-made friend.

"Envy me!" laughed Cora; "the heiress to I

don't know how many millions, envy a struggling authoress who has hard work to make both ends meet!"

"At any rate, you are doing useful work which you like, and you have the satisfaction of earning your own living. You do not, like many, live on the labour of others, and give nothing in return."

"I fear you are a bit of a Socialist, Miss Hardy. For my part, I often envy rich people. Think how much good you will be able to do!"

"But shall I do it?" rejoined Vera remorsefully. "There are so many things in London—so many amusements and temptations. I am becoming as *bourgeoise* as the rest; yet, perhaps, with your help and Mrs. Maitland's—Mr. Balmaine also promised me his—I may, after all, do some good. At present I do nothing. But I must make a beginning. I will be here in good time on Thursday morning to go with Mrs. Maitland."

Vera went away sorrowful, for her visit reminded her of M. Senarclens' teachings and her own almost-forgotten good resolutions. The day was dull, too, and she could not help making a mental comparison between the sloppy streets, gloomy buildings, and sombre air around her, and the towering Alps, the azure lakes, and the clear sky of the mountain land where she had lived so long, and whither, at times like these, she yearned to return. Vera, in fact, was in melancholy mood, and rather home-sick, and she

asked herself whether, despite the attractions and undoubted advantages of London, she had chosen the better part—whether the lot of a Swiss peasant was not more to be desired than the position of a great heiress?

A few days before Miss Hardy's visit to Cora, Sydney Leyton came home from India and Egypt, the last countries he had visited. A good-looking young fellow, with a blonde complexion, a long beard, a face burnt to the colour of a weather-stained brick, he was full of life and energy, the scenes he had witnessed, and the people he had met. His mother was almost absurdly proud of him; Vera, whom he greatly amused, liked him; and he made the house busier and brisker as well by his own high spirits as by the additional visitors which his presence attracted. The young fellow was a great rattle and an incessant talker. If words could achieve distinction, Sydney Leyton was assuredly destined for great things. Vera, as he confided to his mother, pleased him.

"She is a monstrous fine girl," he said; "and so awfully clever, you know. Not at all like other girls—got ideas of her own, and that."

"And she will have more than a hundred thousand a year, your father says," added Lady Leyton significantly.

"Exactly so, *mater*," replied the young fellow pleasantly; "but, do you know, I am not at all

sure whether I would like to sell myself for the money."

"Sell yourself?"

"Dispose of my liberty, I mean. I would rather be free a little longer. I don't want to put my head into the matrimonial noose just yet."

"Not a gilded one?"

"Not even a gilded one, offered by so charming a girl as Vera Hardy."

"But your father and I are anxious for you to settle down, Sydney; and the opportunity seems almost providential. You acknowledge that she is a fine girl, and though, as you say, she has some strange ideas, I think she would make you a good wife. And consider her fortune! With Vera's money, and your talents, my dear boy, you might be anything you liked."

"Prime Minister, for instance," returned the young man with a laugh. "I understand that my father wants me to go into Parliament and save the nation; but taking everything into consideration, I think I would rather be an Australian stockman or Texan cowboy, than enslaved to a constituency and talked to death by wild Irishmen."

"Oh, Sydney!" gasped Lady Leyton. She was dying to see her son in Parliament, and his sentiments appalled her.

"That is what it comes to, I assure you. The House is all very well for young lords and old

fogies, but, for my own part, I would far rather be roving round the world than filing in and out of a division lobby. The game is not worth the candle; and if it is all the same to you, mother, I will keep both my personal and political liberty."

When Lady Leyton, in some distress of mind, reported this conversation to her husband he seemed amused.

"Don't be uneasy," he said; "you must always take fifty per cent. off what Sydney says; and he is a good deal deeper than some people think. He knows on which side his bread is buttered. I am afraid your son has been chaffing you, my dear."

"But why? I don't understand——"

"He wants leaving to his own devices; and I think you had better do as he wants. Syd has got his head screwed on the right way, and is quite as much alive to his own interests as you are."

CHAPTER II.

THE FAR EAST.

"Be sure you are back in time for dinner," said Lady Leyton to Vera, the night before the latter's proposed excursion to the Far East. "I think I told you we shall have the Lord and Lady Mayoress."

"Yes," replied Vera with a slight smile, "I think you did."

She had heard this momentous news at least six times in as many consecutive days. The Leytons were about to give a grand dinner in honour of their son's return from his grand tour. A strong contingent of aldermen and other civic notabilities were expected, and the Lord and Lady Mayoress had been pleased to signify their intention of gracing the party with their presence.

Vera had promised to be with Mrs. Maitland in good time, so she breakfasted alone, and left Grosvenor Square in a hansom cab at the unearthly hour of eight She smiled to herself as she looked at the closed blinds and remembered that the cows at La Boissière had been milked four hours before, and, shutting her eyes, saw in imagination the sun

rising above the majestic Mont Blanc, and filling with rosy light the valleys of Vaud, and heard the *yoedling* of the herdsmen and the songs of the village maidens as they drove the kine to the mountain pastures. What a change in her life and her destiny a few short months had wrought! It seemed only the other day that she was being rated by old Père Courbet, and hearing words of wisdom from M. Senarclens, for she still believed the historian, though perhaps of a less fervent faith than of yore, to be not alone one of the best, but one of the wisest of men. And now she was rich beyond the dreams of avarice, and driving about London in a two-wheeled carriage!

She found Mrs. Maitland and Cora waiting for her, and without loss of time they started on their journey.

"I am not going to take you to any very dreadful places," said Mrs. Maitland. "My work lies principally among the struggling poor—those who want a little help and are worthy of it. The desperate cases and the worst neighbourhoods I leave to the men visitors; they are no fit places for us women."

"It is true, then, there is a great deal of misery in London?"

"Words cannot describe it, Miss Hardy. I often see sights that nearly break my heart, cases which I am utterly unable to relieve."

"You mean that you want money, yet London is so rich. I——"

"It is not altogether want of money," said Mrs. Maitland; "though God knows if we had more of it we could do more good. There are cases in which all the money in the world could do no good. You cannot help those who will not help themselves. What can you do with people who would rather live in filth and penury than do honest work and live cleanly lives; with mothers who make their children beg—and worse than beg—and spend their wretched earnings in drink?"

"Are there such women?" asked Vera horrified.

"My dear, there are thousands of parents in London who would sell their children into slavery, or for any purpose whatever, either for money or drink. But such people are beyond hope. They should be shut up in prison and forced to work, and their children taken from them. It is not right for the State to stand by with folded arms and let children be brought up to become a curse to themselves and a danger to society. But do not think the London poor are all of this class. Many, very many, are the victims of pure misfortune; they struggle bravely to earn their bread, and bear their privations with heroic fortitude. And they help each other, you have no idea how much. They are far less selfish than the well-to-do."

"The well-to-do are worse than selfish," exclaimed

Vera indignantly; "they are criminal. How can they let such infamies exist? There are wealth enough and food enough in London for all. Why then should any want?"

"That is a question more easily asked than answered," replied Mrs. Maitland sadly; "it is one I have often put to myself. But I should not say that the well-to-do are criminal. They do not know, or they have not realised, how much want there is in the world. And many have neither time nor money to spare, or think they have not. They are struggling, not to make a living but to keep up a position. Families who spend two or three thousand a year would look upon it as a dire calamity to be reduced to an expenditure of fifteen hundred, and those who have fifteen hundred do not see their way to devote a twentieth part of it to the poor, for they, too, have a position to keep up. By far the greater part of the money raised for charitable purposes is given by a very few. Most people give nothing, or next to nothing."

"Must we despair, then?" asked Vera warmly. "Can nothing be done to relieve this terrible misery? The State should see to it; they should take charge of the poor."

"Well, we have the poor-law you know; and though there is much the State might do, I would rather trust to voluntary effort. No, my dear Miss Hardy; we must not despair; we must work. Re-

forms always take time, public opinion is slow to move, and progress is only achieved by prolonged effort. We are trying, a few of us, to help the poor on the one hand and enlighten public opinion on the other. And I do think that with time we shall succeed. I quite agree with you that there are food and wealth enough for all. But to take from the haves and give to have-nots, would be wrong. I believe in the Old Book and the Eighth Commandment. What we want is to bring about a sort of voluntary communism; to convince the well-to-do that they have a duty towards their less fortunate fellow-creatures—not merely in the way of money-giving—the easiest and least effective form of charity—but of personal sympathy and active help. We might then hope, if not to prevent poverty, at any rate to extinguish pauperism. It will take a long time to bring this to pass; yet I am full of hope. The number of workers increases. Only just lately a rich man—he was a brewer, but having scruples about continuing so questionable a business, gave it up—has abandoned society to live altogether in the East End and devote nearly the whole of a large income and the whole of his time to the service of the poor. He collects subscriptions from others, too, and is organizing cheap lodging and eating-houses for the poor, and several other useful things. Next to relieving cases of pressing need, his main object is to teach the poor

the great lesson that God helps those who help themselves."

"What a noble fellow!" said Vera. "Is he a Socialist?"

"A Socialist!" answered Mrs. Maitland, whom the question seemed rather to surprise, "Well, since he gives nearly all his substance to the needy, I suppose he is one practically. But if you were to ask him why he acts thus he would probably say that he is constrained thereto by the love of Christ."

"And his name——"

"Is Fletcher. But here we are at our destination. Let us get out and dismiss our cab."

It was clear, even to Vera's unpractised eye, that they were in a poor street and a low neighbourhood. The buildings were mean, the shops ill furnished, their wares of the lowest quality, and in many of them second-hand garments were exposed for sale. Gin palaces were numerous, and in and out of them were going and coming hideous women, villainous-looking men, and ragged and bare-footed children. The houses were gaunt and grim, the windows of many of them mended with paper and stuffed with straw, and in narrow by-streets and filthy back-yards tattered clothing was hanging out to dry.

Vera shuddered. Her artist's soul revolted at the sight of all this squalor, uncleanness and gloom.

The poverty of London was certainly not picturesque, and she wondered how human beings could submit to a fate which in her eyes seemed worse even than slavery or death.

Mrs. Maitland led the way into a narrow and gloomy court, which, though Vera thought it unspeakably squalid, was by no means one of the worst in the neighbourhood. Then they mounted a dark and narrow staircase, between bare and damp walls, from which bits of plaster hung in tatters. On the third flight Mrs. Maitland knocked at a door, and in answer to a hurried "come in," she entered, inviting her companions to follow. It was a small uncarpeted, unpapered room, furnished with a tiny table, four chairs, and a bed. The utensils about the fireless grate and on the mantelpiece showed that the room served every purpose, and the inmates had no other. At the table sat a pale, dark-eyed young woman, working with great energy at a sewing-machine. She was a trousers finisher, and time was so precious to her that she did not rise to receive her visitors. Without pausing to answer Mrs. Maitland's greeting, she asked them to sit down, and went on with her sewing.

"How is your sister?" asked Mrs. Maitland, glancing at the bed, on which lay another young woman, whose wan face, hectic cheek, and skeleton-like fingers left little doubt that she was in the last stage of consumption.

"About the same, I think. That doctor you were good enough to send said that with nourishing food and good port wine her life might be prolonged. But how can the like of us get nourishing food and port wine? It is as much as we can do to live. I often wish I was like Mary there, and that we might die together. I should be at rest then."

"My poor girl, you are weary and do not know what you are saying," said Mrs. Maitland soothingly; "God will keep you. 'He tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' you know."

"I wish He would temper it to me," exclaimed the seamstress almost fiercely. "Here have I been at work seven hours this morning, and when I have worked ten hours more I shall have earned a shilling, and my thread to pay for and my rent to meet, and to buy port wine and nourishing food for my sister—all out of a shilling a day. Yet you say God will help us. I wish He would, I wish He would!"

And the poor girl, after a burst of hysterical laughter, laid her head on the table and wept bitterly.

"Can these things be?" asked Vera in a broken voice; and putting her arm round the seamstress's neck she spoke to her words of comfort. "Do not despair," she said; "here is something for you" (laying a sovereign on the table), "take it, and when that is done you shall have more. I will see

that you do not want, and that your sister has all she needs."

"This!" exclaimed the seamstress wildly, taking up the piece of gold. "Why this is twenty shillings! You do not mean to give me all this, dear lady? You cannot, it is too much."

"Yes, it is all yours," answered Vera gently; "your very own, and when you want more you must let me know, and I will come and see you again."

"Oh, how good you are! Mrs. Maitland spoke truly; God has helped us. But" (hesitating) "it is too much—take half of it for the shoemaker's family in the next flight; they want it more than we do."

"It is all for you," returned Vera; "and if you do not keep it entirely for yourselves I shall be vexed. We will see to the shoemaker's family."

"Who are they?" inquired Mrs. Maitland.

"Name of Striver," answered the seamstress, "second flight. Striver was run over ten days since, and lies in the hospital with a compound fracture of the thigh. I think he drank, and they were always pawning their clothing to buy food; but now I fear they have neither clothing nor bread."

"Let us go," said Vera.

And they went.

They found the shoemaker's wife and five little

children, all in single room. For furniture they had a painted deal table, two or three dilapidated cane-bottomed chairs, and an old bed with a filthy coverlet.

The children were bare-footed and only half-clad. There was neither a shirt nor a shift amongst them. One little girl wore a boy's ragged overcoat and nothing in the world else.

"When had you anything to eat, Mrs. Striver?" asked Mrs. Maitland.

"Yesterday at this time. We've popped every rag and stick we could spare, and now we're fair clemming."

"You are from the country?"

"Ay, are us; I wish we were i' t' country ageean. My maaster had a bit of a fortin left him, and we came to Lunnon to draw it, and then he thowt as he'd start for hissen i' t' shoemaaking line, that being t' trade as he wor browt up to. So he bowt a good-will and a stock, and shopped two jorneymen and set agaat. But he made nowt on't. T' fortin aw went in a twelvemonth; then we wor sowd up, and we've gone fra bad to worse ever sin', and now we're fair at far end—clemming to deeath."

"You come from the North, I fancy?"

"Ay, out o' Yorkshire. We lived not so far fro a place called Bolland, as yo've happen yerd tell on. I wish we wor there now, I do that. What wi' my maaster mending shoes and t' children

gooin to t' factory we could addle a middling good living."

Vera, who only half-understood the woman, took out her purse.

"Not yet," said Mrs. Maitland, with a significant look; "let us first get them something to eat. Come with me."

They went out together.

"I rather fear from the look of that woman," continued Mrs. Maitland, "that she, like her husband, has a weakness for drink. If you gave her money it might not all be spent in food. Life in London has demoralised these poor Strivers, as it has done many of their betters. But the children must eat and be clothed, and then we will see what can be arranged for the family."

Then they went to a baker's shop and bought some bread, and to an eating-house and bought some meat. At a second-hand clothes shop garments were purchased, and Vera found that at an outlay of a little over a pound she had fed and clothed an entire family. She thought that the pleasure of seeing the poor children eat was worth ten times the money. Before going away she paid the baker and eating-house keeper for a week's provisions in advance, and Mrs. Maitland said that she would arrange with a society with which she was connected to have the family sent back to Yorkshire, so soon as Striver was fit to travel.

"There are thousands more in the same plight," she said; "they think London is an El Dorado, and they find it a hell."

They made several more visits, saw whole families making match-boxes at 2¼d. a dozen, finding their own paste and string and fire to dry the boxes. Some were making sacks, for which they got a farthing a-piece; others shirts, at twopence a-piece; and a crippled old tailor and his wife were hard at work with policeman's overcoats, which, when quite finished, brought them in something less than three shillings each.

"I don't know what the contractor gives for his cloth," observed Mrs. Maitland, "but its cost, added to the three shillings, represents his entire outlay, and he doubtless makes a good profit. But if you were to speak to him, he would tell you he cannot afford to pay more. The authorities accept the lowest tender, and the successful competitor is compelled to get his work done at the lowest possible price. It is the same with everything else. One tradesman undersells another, and the price of labour is forced down until the poor find it better to steal than to work. Some people say that competition is a fine thing, I say it is a curse."

Here Mrs. Maitland was accosted by a quiet, intelligent-looking man, wearing a decent black coat—rather a mark of distinction in that neighbourhood.

"Ah, is that you, Morton?" exclaimed Mrs. Maitland. "What news have you to-day?"

"There is a very bad case in Pitman's Rents, and something should be done; but my funds are quite exhausted. Will you come and see? It is not far off?"

"But Pitman's Rents! Isn't it a dreadful place? Can we go?"—glancing at her companions.

"Oh, yes; all the worse characters are out by this time—begging, and worse."

"What do you say, young ladies?—shall we go?"

"By all means," replied Vera; "if there is a lower depth, I should like to see it."

"Come, then," said Mrs. Maitland. "Lead on, Morton."

Morton led them to a wretched little court in a dark little street. The building to which the court gave access was large, but there did not appear to be a whole window in it, and its condition was so dilapidated that it seemed as if the first strong wind would blow it down like a house of cards. It was a place in which the sun never shone, where the fresh air never came—fetid, filthy, and horrible. They groped their way up a dark and rotten staircase, which threatened to give way at every step, and Morton, who went first, had several times to help them past treacherous places and gaping holes;

and the air was so foul that Vera and Cora had much ado to keep themselves from fainting.

At the topmost storey the City missionary—for that was Morton's quality—knocked at the door, which hung loose on its hinges, and, without waiting for an answer, entered the room into which it opened. Den, rather; for it was no more than ten feet square, and the walls and ceiling were black, as it seemed, with the accumulated dirt of ages. The table, an old box turned up-side down, the seat a board resting on bricks, and in one corner stood the crazy remains of an old bedstead. A woman with dishevelled hair and hollow eyes, not more than thirty, but looking fifty, crouched before a grate in which burnt a hardly visible vestige of fire. She was nursing a month-old baby, swathed in a rag.

Mrs. Maitland's sharp eyes detected something moving in the bed.

"What have you there?" she said.

"Children," answered the woman abruptly; "all their things are at the pawn-shop, and I have nowhere else to put them."

It was quite true. Four naked children were wriggling among the rags that covered the relics of the old bedstead.

"How is this?" enquired Mrs. Maitland. "Has she no husband?"

Morton explained that her husband, a bricklayers'

labourer, had deserted her—at any rate he had disappeared—and owing to the birth of her baby she had been unable to follow her calling of shirt-finishing, by which, with hard work, it was possible to earn sixpence a day. Up to the present time she had existed (living it could hardly be called) on charity and by selling and pawning such poor things as she possessed. But now she had nothing more to pledge, and was too proud to beg. Too weak to go out herself, she could not send her children into the street quite naked, and she still retained some feeling of self-respect and independence.

"It is a case for the workhouse," said Mrs. Maitland.

"So it is," answered Morton; "but to get a family into the workhouse requires time, and I do not think they have a bit of bread in the room."

"Not a crust," moaned the woman; "I have nothing for the baby, and the others haven't had a full meal for a month."

"Here, take this, Mr. Morton, and get them what they need," said Vera, moved to tears by the sight of so much misery. And as she spoke she gave the missionary the last sovereign she had in her pocket.

"God bless you, my dear young lady!" exclaimed the woman fervently, "and may neither you nor yours ever know what it is to want. For myself I could bear it, or lay me down and die; but when I

hear the poor children cry for bread and I have none to give 'em, it drives me wild. I feel as if I could kill somebody."

"And no wonder," said Vera. "Poor children!"

After this they went away—for the air of the little room had become absolutely insupportable—the missionary with them, intent on procuring a supply of clothing and food for the wretched family.

"You will see about getting them into the workhouse, Morton?" said Mrs. Maitland, when they had safely reached the bottom of the rickety staircase.

"This very day, ma'am."

"Whose property is this, Morton? These houses are really not fit for pigsties."

"They belong to a Mr. Pitman. He is very rich, they say, and a member of the corporation, and this property brings him in fifty or sixty per cent."

"I would rather be a thief or the proprietor of a gambling-hell than make money in such a way!" exclaimed Mrs. Maitland indignantly. "It is worse than murder."

It was now time for them to go, and after parting with Morton they made for the nearest cab-stand.

"What is your opinion now, Miss Hardy?" asked Cora. "Do you think you will be able to find a use for your income?"

"I do," answered Vera emphatically. "I have

found my work, and for the first time I feel really glad I am an heiress."

"But she must not be quite so lavish as she has been to-day," observed Mrs. Maitland, with a smile. "As it is, I do not think any harm has been done. But to give sovereigns away at a time is too much, especially when there are more claims than the longest purses can satisfy, and indiscriminate charity is as bad—in effect, if not in intention—as downright avarice."

CHAPTER III.

VERA MAKES A SENSATION.

VERA was very silent on the homeward journey. The day's experience appalled her. She could think of nothing but what she had seen. Much as she had heard and read of pauperism, and of the wretchedness of the London poor, she had not even faintly realised how wretched they were, how utter poverty could be. In Canton Vaud destitution began when a family was reduced to the possession of a single cow or half-a-dozen goats! Yet Vaud was not nearly so rich as London; there was more wealth in a single metropolitan parish than in the whole canton? Where lay the responsibility for this frightful misery, of which Mrs. Maitland assured her she had seen the merest glimpse; with personal selfishness or a vicious social organisation? Which was right, M. Senarclens, who saw no hope of amendment save by a great upheaval of the masses and a revolutionary cataclysm; or Mrs. Maitland, who believed in the efficacy of voluntary effort, and that patience and perseverance would effect more in the long run than grand schemes and heroic

measures? Despite her reverence for the historian, she was rather disposed to take Mrs. Maitland's view of the matter; but there could be no doubt that the fortunate failed shamefully in their duty to the disinherited, and it seemed to her that men like the owner of Pitman's Rents should be banned from society, and their nefarious trade stopped by the strong hand of the law.

It was late when Vera reached Grosvenor Square. A few minutes after she appeared in the drawing-room dinner was announced.

"I am sorry you did not come sooner," said Sydney Leyton, whose arm she had taken, "you have missed making the acquaintance of the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, and all the other swells."

"A great loss, I am sure," Vera replied, smiling. "I must do my best to bear the disappointment with equanimity, and you can point these swells out to me, you know."

"With pleasure; but I fear you have no great reverence for swells, Miss Hardy."

"I don't think I have very much."

"Nor I; particularly city swells. They always suggest the idea of turtle and venison, old port, and all the luxuries of the season. That is the Lord Mayor on my father's right hand."

"That tall thin man, with the long lean face?"

"Yes."

"Well, I am disappointed. He is the very last man at the table I should have taken for the greatest man in London."

"The greatest man in London! Ah, I see; like all foreigners you have got the idea that our chief magistrate is only a little lower than the sovereign. That is a mistake; out of the City he is nobody very particular, and after his term has expired, nobody at all. You are right, Mr. Boltwell is far from looking like an ideal Lord Mayor; yet he is said to be an excellent man of business, and he dispenses the hospitality of the Mansion House with profuse liberality. His right-hand neighbour, Alderman Chipping, will be the next Lord Mayor; does his appearance please you?"

"Very much. His physique is splendid; and with that white beard and ruddy countenance, and those dark eyes, he looks quite picturesque. I should like to paint his portrait."

"Yes, Billy Chipping is a fine old fellow, and will well beseem his office. He is terribly bumptious, though! But that is rather a qualification for the mayoralty. When he presides at civic feasts and entertains great personages, they will call his pompous ways his dignified bearing. I remember——"

At this point Mr. Sydney was interrupted by a question from a lady on his right, and Vera was left to her own thoughts—rather to her satisfaction, for

she was not in a conversational mood. The sights she had witnessed in the East were still in her mind, and she could not help contrasting them with the scene before her. The table was resplendent with silver and adorned with choice flowers; the viands were of the richest, the wines of the rarest, and some of the ladies wore as many gems as would have redeemed a dozen poor families from misery for the term of their natural lives, still leaving the owners enough to make a brave show. Yet, probably, no one there save herself was giving a thought to the disinherited, and if she had not been so lately amongst them they might have been equally remote from her thoughts. Whence arose this callousness? and where could be found a remedy for these terrible inequalities of condition, whereby one class of the community was loaded with wealth and demoralised by luxury, while others had hardly the wherewithal to live, or were suffering the last extremities of want? It was a puzzle, and, as Vera well knew, one that had bewildered wiser heads than hers. And then she bethought her of a graceful custom that prevails in Canton Lucerne, which, though it may not do much to raise the lot of the lowly, at least shows that they are not altogether ignored by those whom fortune has blessed with plenty of good things. At every dinner of a formal or public character a collection is made for the Poor's Fund of the commune. All give something, for it is con-

sidered that when people are feasting, and presumably enjoying themselves, they should remember those who lack the common necessaries of life, and out of their abundance help them.

"How quiet and pensive you are, Vera," observed Lady Leyton, who until that moment had not noticed her. "I fear your exertions have been too much for you."

"Not at all," replied Vera, rallying. "I feel a little tired, naturally, but not very much."

"What do you think of the East End and the poor people you have seen there?"

"I wonder they do not come and cut all our throats," said Vera, half in jest, half in earnest.

But Lady Leyton took the saying very earnestly indeed, and quite *au pied de la lettre.*

"Heavens, Vera!" she exclaimed, turning pale, "what do you mean? what has happened? Were you—were you molested? There are frightful places at the East End, full of thieves and murderers. I should not have let you go. Were you robbed? What was Mrs. Maitland thinking of to take you among such wretches?"

"I did not see any wretches, except in the sense that all whom I met with are wretchedly poor. I was neither molested nor robbed; but I gave away all the money I had with me. When I spoke of cutting throats, I merely meant that the poor I saw are so terribly poor, so utterly destitute, that it

would not be very surprising if they were to do something desperate. But there is no fear of that. They are very patient, poor things; much more so, I fancy, than we should be, if we were forced to exchange places with them."

"Heaven forbid! What a revolutionary sentiment! You quite make me shudder, child. But don't you think you exaggerate? You never saw any of the very poor before, and you may think them worse off than they really are."

On this Vera described some of the "interiors" she had seen, and as her imagination had been much impressed and she was full of her subject, she described them well, and with considerable realistic force. All within earshot listened to her; and several of the ladies were visibly affected, and asked many questions. Vera was observing that the worst place she had visited was Pitman's Rents, when she was interrupted by a sharp-visaged man, with thin lips and an unpleasant smirk, who did not seem to have quite caught what she said.

"I beg your pardon," he observed, "but I think I heard you mention my name."

"I think you are mistaken," she replied, "I have not the pleasure of knowing your name."

"Pitman is my name."

"What a singular coincidence! I certainly did use your name, though I was not speaking of you.

I was speaking of a dreadful place in the East End, called Pitman's Rents."

"That dreadful place is my property, Miss Hardy, unfortunately."

"The people who live there are unfortunate," said Vera drily. "Some of your tenants are dying of hunger, Mr. Pitman."

"It is possible; but surely you would not suggest that I am under any obligation to keep my tenants in food as well as let them live rent free?"

"Do you let them live rent free, Mr. Pitman?"

"Why, not quite, but the rents they pay are very moderate, and my agent has instructions to deal with them as leniently as possible."

Vera could not contradict this statement, though she did not believe it, so she contented herself with suggesting that no conceivable rent for dwellings so dilapidated could be considered moderate.

"Excuse me, Miss Hardy," rejoined Mr. Pitman, sharply, in his harsh, grinding voice, "that shows how little you know of the subject. I have very heavy rates and taxes to pay for that property, the condition of which, I admit, leaves something to be desired. But in two or three years the ground lease is out, and the land and all that is on it will go to the ground landlord, so that I literally cannot afford to put Pitman's Rents in good condition. It would be making you a present, Miss Hardy."

"Making me a present, Mr. Pitman!" exclaimed

Vera in great surprise, trying at the same time to develop from her inner consciousness what a ground landlord could be.

"Yes, making you a present, for the ground on which Pitman's Rents is built belongs to the Hardy Trust. Your grandfather was very fond of putting his money into ground rents, and he was right. There is no better investment, especially in London, where property increases so rapidly in value. He was too sharp for me, and got the land before I knew it was in the market. The consequence is that in two or three years—by the time you are of age, I imagine—Pitman's Rents will become yours, and you will be at full liberty to let the tenants live rent free, or turn them out just as you like." And Mr. Pitman smiled a triumphant smile, for he had been painfully conscious that the sympathies of his auditors were against him.

"Can this be?" said Vera, turning to Sydney Leyton. "Is it possible that this horr— that Pitman's Rents will one day be mine?"

"I am sure I cannot tell you, Miss Hardy. But I should think nothing is more likely, and you may be quite sure that Mr. Pitman is right. He knows if anybody does."

"So much the better," said Vera, recovering her confidence. "I will try to see that my tenants have dwellings fit for human beings to live in, and that they do not die of hunger."

Sydney, seeing that this retort was likely to draw an angry answer from Pitman, interposed with an irrelevant remark which, as he intended, had the effect of turning the talk into another channel. Later in the evening he and Vera met in the drawing-room and had a few words *en tète-â-tête*.

"I quite agree with you, Miss Hardy, about those poor wretches at the East End, and Pitman's Rents, and that," he said. "Society does not do its duty by them. It is not right that these things should be, and Pitman is a rack-renting cad, everybody knows that, but he has a certain position, and being in the Corporation my father thinks he must recognise him in some way. He thought he had turned the tables on you when he said the ground of Pitman's Rents was yours. But you paid him back in his own coin, and with interest. I had no idea you were so clever at repartee, Miss Hardy. Pitman won't forget you in a hurry."

"Nor I him. It is not very satisfactory to think that a part of my income comes from these poor starving creatures."

"Nor does it. Pitman pays the ground rent. You have nothing to do with his tenants."

"I am afraid it comes to pretty much the same thing; they pay him, and he pays the trustees."

"He would have to pay them in any case, and if the ground belonged to somebody else it would

be exactly the same. And it is better that it should belong to you, because when you are of age and the property comes into your possession you will be able to do with the houses what you like, pull them down and replace them with model dwellings for working-class tenants."

"That I shall certainly do, Mr. Sydney. I thank you for the hint, and I am greatly obliged to you for taking so kind an interest in my affairs."

"Nobody who has the pleasure of knowing Miss Hardy can help taking an interest both in her affairs and herself," answered the young man warmly, and with a look expressive of homage and admiration.

To this speech Vera was saved the trouble, and possibly the embarrassment, of replying by a message from Lady Leyton, who wanted to present her to the Lady Mayoress.

CHAPTER IV.

CORFE'S BROTHER.

One bright moonlight night, as Balmaine and Delane were walking across La Plaine to their lodgings they perceived a man lying on the grass, near the foot-path. The weather being warm there was nothing in this very unusual, but as they neared the prostrate individual he rose slowly and with seeming difficulty to his feet, and they saw that he was in a somewhat damaged condition. His hat was crushed, his coat torn, his face streaked with blood, and he appeared unable to use his left hand.

"What is the matter?" asked Balmaine, "you appear to be hurt."

"Rather," said the man in English, shaking himself and trying to straighten his hat.

"You are English?" returned Balmaine.

"Yes, and you are the editor of the *Helvetic News*."

"How do you happen to know that?"

"You were pointed out to me the other day at the Café du Roi, and to tell the truth I was on my way to call upon you when that dastard struck me down."

"What dastard?"

"My own bro ther, I am sorry to say. But I will tell you all about it to-morrow. I must go home and repair damages.

"Come to my lodgings and repair damages. They are hard by, and Delane and I will plaister up your wounds, and give you some supper."

"Thank you. I accept your invitation with pleasure, for I have something to communicate that may interest you."

"You were saying that you had been struck down by your own brother," said Balmaine, leading the way towards the pension.

"Yes; and you know him well, though he is no friend of yours. He would like to treat you as he has treated me—or worse, and he will if you don't take care."

"Indeed!" replied Alfred. "I am grateful for the warning, but its value would be increased if I knew against whom I have to be on my guard."

"Against my brother, Vernon Corfe."

"I fancied as much, for so far as I know, Corfe is the only enemy I have; but from what you say, I am not the only one whose enemy he is."

"Not by any means," answered the other, with a bitter laugh; "Vernon is the enemy of every one who opposes him or whom he envies."

"And he actually struck you down, and left you lying on the ground?"

"He did; but thereby hangs a tale, which I must tell you when you have half an hour to spare."

"No time like the present," answered Balmaine, whose curiosity was greatly excited; "here we are at the pension."

Alfred ordered a supply of hot water, and took the young fellow to his bedroom, and examined his hurts. He had received two heavy blows on his head and another on his left hand, when he raised to parry the second blow, by which his fingers had been a good deal damaged and his signet-ring smashed. Sticking-plaister and a wash greatly improved his appearance, but as he was hardly in a fit state to sup at the table d'hôte, Balmaine ordered supper to be served in a room adjoining his bedchamber, which, since his accession to the editorship, he had used as a study and sitting-room.

The meal over, cigars were lighted, and Hugh Corfe, who appeared to be a few years younger than his brother, and looked like a gentleman, proceeded to tell his story.

"It is not very much of a story," he said, "though there are parts of it that may surprise you a bit. My father, as I dare say you know, is an officer on half-pay. He lives mostly in Italy, with my mother and my sisters; and besides Vernon, who is the eldest, I have two other brothers, so altogether we are a pretty large family. My father is a strict

disciplinarian, but not nearly so much as he used to be; and I fancy Vernon was not brought up very judiciously. At the best he would probably have turned out badly; but severity makes some lads deceitful; what they dare not do openly they do secretly. It was so with Vernon, and my father now freely admits that he took a wrong course with him. But whatever may be the cause, he has been a trouble to the family nearly all his life; latterly he has been a disgrace. He was always prone to extravagance, and when my father tried to cure him by stopping his pocket-money, he pilfered. He even stole my sisters' jewellery and sold it. At the same time he was very clever, particularly at languages, and my father had no difficulty in getting him into the army. For a while he got on well, but one fine day he did something not quite square, and had the alternative offered him of standing a court-martial or leaving the service, and he left it. But for my father's influence he would probably have been prosecuted. Since that time Vernon has lived practically by his wits. Friends of the family have got him several good appointments, but either by his unmanageable temper or downright swindling he invariably loses them. He cannot go to Italy, because he got a lot of money from a banker at Genoa against a cheque on a London bank where he had no account; and it is not very long since my mother, unknown to my father, raised money at a great

sacrifice to get him out of a scrape which would have ruined him for life and utterly disgraced us. But he did disgrace us after all, though the affair was kept pretty quiet; and we are now beginning to think that the best thing that could happen to him would be to get locked up. For my part I wish he had been locked up long since. Such a scoundrel has no right to be at large; and, unless I am greatly mistaken, he has committed a crime which, if it could be proved against him, might cost him his life. I am not sure that he did not mean to kill me just now. Did you know he was married?"

"Not until Mrs. Corfe appeared on the scene."

"Mrs. Corfe! Oh! you mean poor Esther Brandon. She was not his wife"

"No!" exclaimed Balmaine. "How was that?"

"By Jove! what a fellow!" said Delane. "Do you mean to say they were not married?"

"Not legally. It is a very sad story. My brother married an English girl of very good family with a little money. He spent the money, of course, and then took up with Esther Corfe, and not being able to win her without, went through a form of marriage with her."

"That was bigamy."

"Of course it was; and when the affair got wind, neither of the two women would have anything more to do with him, and his wife's relatives only refrained from prosecuting him on condition of his

leaving England at once, which of course he did. Then, as far as I can make out, a false report of my sister in-law's death got abroad, and Esther came here in the hope that Vernon would make her his legal wife, which of course he did not."

"And is your sister-in-law still living?"

"Yes; but she resumed her maiden name, and went as nurse into a London hospital, and that, I expect, gave rise to the rumour that she was dead."

"Why, he wanted to marry Miss Hardy!" said Balmaine, hotly indignant. "What a villain!"

"There is no mistake about that. I dare say, though, he really thought Maggie—his wife, you know—was dead. For a long time we had no idea he was at Geneva, but when my father heard—from Colonel Bevis, I think—he sent me here to see what Vernon was doing, and if possible get back some of the money he borrowed from my mother, and which he faithfully promised to repay. So I came," went on the young man, after a long pause. "I have got no money out of him, of course. I did not think I should. But I have made a few discoveries which I think will rather astonish you."

"I doubt it," observed Delane. "I am about as much astonished as I can be already. But I can still wonder. What next?"

"Well, I am pretty sure that he murdered poor Esther Brandon."

"I have heard as much hinted before," said Bal-

maine thoughtfully, "but not in earnest, I think. What motive could he have for murdering her?"

"To get her out of the way, in order that he might marry that girl you were speaking of—Miss Hardy."

"But you say Esther Brandon was not his legal wife."

"Neither was she. But don't you see that she was in his way, and that he could not disclose the truth without causing a scandal and compromising his chances with Miss Hardy? Madame Marcquardt, with whom he lodged, is quite of my opinion."

"So am I," returned Balmaine, recalling his conversation with Corfe about secret poisonings and Alpine accidents, "but I fear he did it in such a way as to defy detection."

"Of course he did. My brother Vernon is an awfully clever fellow, I can tell you, and he is not the man to risk either his life or his liberty if he can get his ends without. He laid his plans very well; there are no proofs against him. And there's another thing I found out. He is no longer on your paper; he has lost all his pupils; he does nothing whatever, and yet he seems to be quite in easy circumstances. This was a riddle which I was determined to unravel; and with the help of a man I knew in Italy, and who knows Vernon well, though Vernon does not knoow him, I have succeeded.

He is a police spy, in the service of the French Government."

"Do you really think so?"

"I have not the least doubt of it. Vernon will do anything for money—anything but honest work. He is following no occupation, yet he keeps up a good appearance; and when I enquired how he was living he asked what the deuce that was to me. And it is very likely. There are lots of refugees here about whom the Imperial police is glad to have information, and Vernon is much less likely to incur suspicion of being a *mouchard* than one of their own countrymen. He goes amongst them in the character of an English sympathiser with revolution, and that; and as he has a lively imagination and a ready pen, he is just the sort of man to concoct imaginary plots and conversations, and report them to Paris; and, you may depend upon it, he gets well paid."

"But isn't that rather a dangerous game?" said Balmaine. "If any of those refugees he is betraying find him out, he will stand a very good chance of getting a stab in the back some night, and being chucked into the river."

"Possibly; but Vernon is awfully clever, and, where his own safety is concerned, as wary as a fox. I dare say he will get off with a whole skin, as he has always done before. I would lock him up if I could; but as I cannot, I shall try to make his posi-

tion in Geneva as uncomfortable as possible—too hot to hold him, in fact," said the young fellow vindictively.

"How?" asked Balmaine. "There are many suspicious circumstances against your brother; he is evidently a very bad fellow; but where are your proofs?"

"Well, I cannot prove that he murdered Esther Brandon, if that is what you mean, or that he is in the pay of the French police. But I can prove that he is a bigamist and that Esther was not his wife; and when these facts are made known it will be pretty warm for him with the English colony, I fancy. I shall tell, too, about the murderous assault he committed on me just now, as also a few other things not very much to his credit. I mean, also, to denounce him to the police here, and if they do not expel him from the place they will keep a very sharp eye on him."

"You are quite resolved on this?" said Balmaine significantly. Villain as Vernon Corfe was, he did not like to see this vindictiveness on the part of a brother.

"Quite. You are thinking, perhaps, of the proverb about washing one's dirty linen out of doors. I don't care for that. It is only right everybody should know what manner of man my brother is, so that they may be on their guard —and when he struck me down in such a

cowardly fashion! But I did not tell you about that."

"No."

"Well, we had several talks, and I urged him strongly, as he seemed to be doing so well, to pay up some of the money he owes the family. And then we quarrelled. I spoke my mind pretty freely to him, and for several days we did not meet. But this evening he came into the Café du Roi where I was taking a hand in a rubber with some English fellows, and made as if he had something to say. So I went out with him, and we walked in this direction. At first he spoke quite reasonably, said he was sorry for having caused the family so much trouble, and that he would try and give me some money. And then, when he had thrown me off my guard, and we were out on La Plaine there, he turned suddenly round exclaiming, 'I'll teach you to meddle in my affairs, you young imp,' hit me a crashing blow on the head with his stick followed by another, which I partly parried with my hand. But it knocked me down and completely dazed me. I must have been on the ground several minutes when you came up. If he had not heard footsteps, or fancied somebody was coming, I do believe he would have finished me off. And now I mean to expose him. To-morrow I shall tell the chaplain and the consul what I have told you, and all the English fellows I know that frequent the Café du

Roi. I shall see the police, too, and tell them of the assault. I regard Vernon Corfe as no longer my brother; if they hang him I don't care. And now if you will kindly allow me, I will take my leave. My head aches badly, and the sooner I am in bed the better."

"You have not told us your name," said Balmaine.

"No more I have. Hugh is my name. Here is my card."

Alfred and Delane offered to see Mr. Hugh Corfe safely to his lodgings. But he declined the offer, saying he would take a *fiacre* at the nearest stand.

"A queer business," observed Delane when their guest was gone.

"Very," said Balmaine. "This confirms the very worst suspicions we have had about Corfe.

"And a good deal more. Why, hanging would be too good for the fellow. But what do you think of the brother?"

"I would rather he had not shown quite so much vindictiveness, for bad a fellow as Corfe is, they are both children of the same mother."

"I was after thinking the same thing myself," returned the Irishman as he pensively lighted a cigar. "Vindictiveness seems to run in the family. If Mr. Hugh had got the money and had not got his head broken, I don't suppose we should have had the pleasure of making his acquaintance."

"At any rate, we should not have heard all these revelations."

"And they are revelations. By Jove, what a row there will be when the thing gets out! I should just like to see Mrs. Gibson's face when she hears those two were not properly married."

CHAPTER V.

HOW MAYO BOSSED THE JOB.

DELANE'S prevision was fully verified by the event. Hugh Corfe's revelations caused a tremendous sensation. The indignation of the ladies who had received and visited poor Esther knew no bounds. Mrs. Gibson, who was staying in Geneva, while Gibson sought another situation in England, wrote her husband a letter in which her outraged virtue found vent in bitter upbraidings, she reproached him for introducing her to the Corfes, and more than hinted that he knew "the shameless woman" was no better than she should be, "all the time." She hardly seemed to blame Corfe at all, and expressed no pity whatever for his victim.

"Just like a woman," thought Gibson. "Poor Esther, she was not a bad sort, after all; I wish there were more like her." And then he congratulated himself on being a considerable distance from the wife of his bosom. It was so much easier to burn her letters than restrain her tongue.

Mrs. Mayo, when she heard the news, almost went into hysterics to think how she had been im-

posed upon. Madame Caquetage was of course quite triumphant, and gave an afternoon hen party, at which the scandal formed the sole subject of conversation, and the tale was retold with marvellous embellishments. It was, moreover, proposed and carried by approving murmurs, that no *soi-disant* married woman should henceforth be received into Genevan society who was not known by some creditable person to be married *comme il faut*, or whose marriage lines were not produced and pronounced good by competent authority—say by the chaplain, the consul, or the English *pharmacien*, a nice old gentleman in whom great confidence was reposed.

As for Corfe, he neither went away nor seemed abashed. Except a few English and Americans, not much better than himself and his foreign associates, who did not think any the worse of a man for having two wives at the same time, everybody cut him. But the only difference he made was to swagger about more than ever. If he chanced to meet Mrs. Gibson or Mrs. Mayo, or any of the other women by whom he had been patronised when he was in the odour of respectability, he would take off his hat and make them a very polite bow, much to their annoyance. Mrs. Gibson expressed the intention of hitting him with her parasol if he did it again ; but when he did it again she somehow failed to carry her threat into execution. Another of Corfe's

pleasant ways was to stand near the English Church and make loud and not very complimentary remarks about members of the congregation as they emerged from the sacred edifice. Then, on a Sunday afternoon, he would drive about in an open carriage with a questionable companion or two, not always of his own sex, and stare insolently at every old acquaintance whom he met.

"If they think their sneers and lies and cuttings-dead will force me out of the town," he was heard to say one evening in the Café du Roi, "they are infernally mistaken. I shall not budge till I choose."

All this time Mayo was away in London and Leyland reigned in his stead. The ingenious proprietor had almost, as he informed his associate, "put the thing through," meaning thereby the sale of the paper to a company; and knowing that Mayo, though no more audacious, was more energetic than himself, he had sent him to London to give the finishing stroke to the transaction, promising him for his pains a handsome bonus in cash as also a large interest in the new enterprise, and he was now in daily expectation of hearing that the business was completed. Leyland had good cause to put a high value on his manager's capacity and resource. During the former's absence in London Mayo had settled the claim of Harman and Brothers' liquidators for £500, borrowed from the

Helvetic's new bankers, MM. Daxelhoffer, Henriquet et Cie. The liquidator was extremely loth to accept so small a composition, but when Mayo politely yet firmly intimated that in the event of the offer being refused he should be under the painful necessity of stopping the paper, in which case it was very unlikely that the Harman's estate would get 500 francs, the poor man drew a long breath, made an expressive grimace, and wrote out a receipt in full of all demands.

"It was a grand *coup*," observed Leyland, when they were talking the matter over. "I am not surprised at that liquidator fellow taking £500. He would have been a fool if he had not. But I cannot for the life of me understand how you got the money out of those Daxelhoffer people. That was really clever, now. Why, they are said to be the most close-fisted bankers in all Geneva."

Mayo did not complete the "putting of the thing through" with quite so much dispatch as he expected, and Leyland was kept on the tenter-hooks of suspense a good deal longer than he liked. But one day, when he was beginning to fear that something had gone "deucedly wrong," and feeling very low-spirited in consequence, he received a long telegram from the manager, for which that gentleman charged five pounds in his accounts (it had cost him nearly three), announcing the complete success of his mission. Everything was

sealed, signed, and delivered, and Leyland might draw on a London banker (whom he named) for twenty-five thousand francs whenever he thought fit.

After relieving his feelings by a sort of view hallo, and exclaiming, "By Jingo, what a God-send!" Leyland put on his hat and his grandest manner, went down to the bank, and immensely surprised Daxelhoffer, Henriquet and Co. by handing in a draft on London for £1,000, and telling them that the paper had been turned into a company, with a capital of half a million francs. He then invited M. Henriquet and two other friends to second breakfast with him at the Hôtel de la Croix, and gave them the most sumptuous feed which the *chef*, at so short a notice, could produce.

The breakfast, an affair of several hours, over, Leyland returned to the office and had a talk with Balmaine, which wrought an unexpected and momentous change in our hero's prospects.

It will be remembered that one of the consequences of Alfred's sojourn in Switzerland was a modification of his political faith. He became so far a Liberal that, without doing violence to his conscience, he could advocate the cause with which the *Helvetic News* had always identified itself—more probably from accident than design, for Leyland, like Duke Rollo, made no scruple in saying that he was for the side that paid the best. The ministry

of the day was of the Liberal persuasion, and ever since Balmaine took the editorial reins he had given the government a hearty yet not indiscriminating support. Despite the comparative insignificance of the *Helvetic News*, moreover, and Mayo's opinion that leading articles were mostly taken as read, he received many letters which showed that they attracted attention, and to one or two had fallen the honour of being quoted by a London paper of large circulation. But the days of the Government were numbered; the country was in the throes of a general election, and the latest returns left no doubt that the Liberal party had been defeated "all along the line," and that either at or before the meeting of Parliament ministers would be compelled to resign.

When the news came to hand Alfred wrote a leader in his best style, deploring this result, denouncing the blindness of British electors in preferring the vague promises of Lord Slapdash to the tried services of Mr. Whetstone, and exposing the intrigues and manœuvres which, in the opinion of the *Helvetic News*, had caused the fall "of one of the best and greatest ministries that ever swayed the destinies of the empire," &c. Balmaine was reading a proof of this article—not without a slight sense of satisfaction, for it seemed to him rather well done—when Leyland lounged into the room, his hat on one side, a cigar, about six inches long,

in his mouth, and himself evidently in a state of serene complacency.

"How do, Balmaine?" he said, taking a chair. "Heard the news?"

"About the election, you mean? I am very sorry——"

"No, I don't," interposed the proprietor; "the elections be hanged! I mean about the paper."

"No; what about it? Has something happened?"

"Rather. I sent Mayo to London, you know, to boss the job, and he has put it through slick. Everything is arranged, company formed, capital—£20,000—subscribed. We shall never look behind us now, my boy."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Balmaine warmly, "and I congratulate you on your success."

"Thank you. Yes, it is a good thing; it will be a good thing for us all. I shall pay up all arrears this week end, and from the beginning of next month your salary will be increased to two hundred and fifty francs a week. I mean also to do something for Delane and Milnthorpe."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Leyland," returned Alfred, his face glowing with pleasure. "On my own behalf, and on behalf of my colleagues, I can assure you that your liberality will not be thrown away. We shall all work with redoubled zeal to

promote the interests of the paper, which I hope may long flourish."

"I am sure you will, and you have only to go on doing well for the paper and it will do well for you. But there is one thing—we must change our politics."

"Change our politics!" exclaimed the editor, looking as glum as a moment before he had looked delighted.

"Yes. These people who are finding the tin are high Tory and Low Churchy. Several of 'em are parsons, and they look more to making the *Helvetic* an organ than for interest on their money, though I dare say they will take that, too, if they can get it. Yes, we must turn our coats at once, old man. And what's the odds?"

Balmaine made no answer; he did not like the idea at all.

"And I want you to do a good rattling, out-and-out Conservative leader for to-morrow's paper. Anything you like, so long as you pitch it in strong. You have a capital opening on the elections. Couldn't you call it—yes, I once read something like it in a novel—or was it a leading article?—'Our Old Queen and our New Premier.' That would sound awfully well now, wouldn't it?"

"I am afraid it would hardly be complimentary to the Queen," said Balmaine, smiling in spite of himself.

"You are quite right; it hardly would. I did not think of that, and we must be loyal, whatever else we are. The throne and the altar, and all that sort of thing; you know what I mean."

"I think I do. But must this really be, Mr. Leyland?"

"Of course it must; it is in the contract, and as all the shares are not yet taken up—though we have got a nice lot of money in—it is of the utmost importance that we lay ourselves out to please these people. Why do you ask?"

"Because I do not see my way to complying with your request."

"You mean it is too late. I ought to have told you sooner, I know. But there is time yet. I'll make the fellows stay all night, if necessary, and pay them double and give them a good blow out at the Hotel de Navigation on Saturday night into the bargain."

"I don't mean that. There is time enough and to spare. I mean, Mr. Leyland, that I cannot change my opinions to order—blow hot and cold with the same breath and unsay to-day what I said yesterday."

"Your opinions! You are not the paper, you are only the editor."

"That is a fact of which I am fully aware, Mr. Leyland; but even an editor may have a conscience, and I cannot do violence to mine by advocating

views to which I object, and which in this very article (holding up the proof) I have condemned."

"Just as you like," answered Leyland angrily; "but I must tell you plainly that you will either have to do my bidding or lose your place."

"I quite understand that," said Balmaine, firmly, though a little sadly, for the sacrifice he felt it his duty to make was a heavy one, "but what must be, must be. You think me foolish, I dare say, but I would rather lose my place than forfeit my self-respect."

"I know a fellow in London in every way suitable, who will be glad to come for two hundred francs a week, and write whatever he is told. I shall write to engage him at once. But about this article for to-morrow's paper, could not you do it for this once?"

"If I could do that I could do everything."

"Well then, I'll do a leader myself, or get one done. But look here, leave me that proof, so that in case I don't succeed I shall have something to fall back upon."

"Certainly," said Balmaine, wondering greatly what sort of a leader the proprietor, who had never written a five-line paragraph in his life, would turn out, or how, at such short notice, he could get one written. "It is quite understood, then, that you undertake to supply the leader, that I have no further responsibility in the matter."

"Quite."

"In that case I may as well go. I am under engagement to dine with the Rosslyns, and it is about time I went."

"But you will look in to-morrow?"

"Of course; and if you do not object, I shall be glad to come to the office as usual, until the arrival of my successor."

"By all means do so. We shall only want about two political articles a week, and I dare say we can knock them together somehow without asking you to do violence to your conscience."

CHAPTER VI.

MILNTHORPE'S MISFORTUNE.

When Balmaine went down to breakfast next morning he opened his copy of the paper with some eagerness, being curious to see what sort of a leader Leyland had succeeded in "knocking together." He could hardly believe his eyes when he saw that it was his own, after all. But with what a difference! "The Liberal defeat" was turned into "The Conservative victory;" for "deplore" had been substituted "rejoice;" and by a few similar alterations, most ingeniously contrived, the whole tone and intent of the leader were reversed, and his jeremiad over the fall of Mr. Whetstone had become an *Io pæan* over the rise of Lord Slapdash.

"Well!" he ejaculated, "if that is not about the biggest piece of impudence I ever knew!"

"What is the biggest piece of impudence you ever knew?" asked Delane, who had just taken a place opposite to him.

"Converting my Liberal leader into a Tory one. It is uncommonly well done, too. I did not give Leyland credit for so much literary skill."

"Are you sure he did it?" asked the sub-editor, with a significant smile.

"You don't mean! Ah, I see who is the plagiarist."

"Don't be waxy, old man. It's a delicate thing to meddle with a man's copy, I know. But in the circumstances I really don't see how I could have done otherwise. Leyland wanted me to do it, and it would have been as much as my place is worth to have refused. And I am no politician, you know Whigs and Tories are all the same to me. I hope you don't blame me, Balmaine."

"Not a bit, my dear fellow. You did quite right; and I cannot too much admire the way in which you carried out your instructions. Leyland ought to be well pleased."

"So he is; and he has promised to raise my screw twenty francs a week. But I am awfully sorry you are leaving us, Balmaine. I would rather lose my rise, and something more, than lose you. We have always got on so well."

"I am sorry, too," said Balmaine gravely; "very sorry. It is no light thing to give up the editorship and £500 a year, to say nothing of parting with such tried friends as you and Milnthorpe. But I could not have acted differently and retain my self-respect. I dare say you think I have acted very foolishly."

"No, I don't. As I said, I have no decided

political opinion, but I understand your position and respect your motives. I don't say, though, that I should have done likewise; very few fellows would. I suppose you will go to London?"

"Yes, that is my intention. As I don't seem to have struck oil here, there is nothing for it but to seek my fortune there. But I shall not go immediately. I have promised Leyland to stay on until my successor arrives."

"I wonder what sort of a chap he will be," said Delane thoughtfully.

"Very easy in his principles, from what Leyland says; he will write whatever he is told."

"I hope he will be as easy in his temper, that is all," returned the Irishman, "I say, won't they make a nice trio? for two easier-principled ruffians than Leyland and Mayo I defy you to find in all Europe. Do you know, I feel rather sorry for these poor shareholders?"

"You think it won't last, after all."

"Not it. Leyland is one of those fellows who go up like a rocket and come down like the stick. It is in him. He cannot help it. But he is going up, now, luckily, and we shall get paid up on Saturday."

Which they did, and Balmaine found that, with his back pay and the sum Leyland proposed to give him in lieu of notice, he should have nearly

eighty pounds wherewith to start life in London. Delane, in his joy at getting so big a draw, and a rise in his "screw" at the same time, gave a supper at the Café du Roi, and treated Madame von Schmidt and her daughter, Balmaine and Milnthorpe to a carriage trip over the Col de la Faucille, and an *al fresco* banquet on the top. Milnthorpe got leave of absence and went up the Valais, intending, as he said, to tramp through the Rhone valley and pass by the Gemmi into the Bernese Oberland. He meant to be away a fortnight, but four days after his friend's departure, Balmaine received a letter from him that almost took his breath away. It was dated Saxon-les-Bains, and stated with great point and brevity that the writer had been making an utter fool of himself—lost every centime of his money at *trente-et-quarante* and *rouge-et-noir*—and begged Alfred to remit him a hundred francs by wire, that he might pay his hotel bill and get away "from this cursed place."

The money was sent, and on the following day Milnthorpe turned up at the office, looking terribly crestfallen.

"I suppose you were very much surprised," he said to Balmaine.

"I don't think I was ever so much surprised in my life. You are the very last man I should have suspected of being——"

"A gambler. Out with it; don't mince matters!"

"Oh no," said Alfred, eagerly. "I did not mean that at all. I was going to say so foolish. You cannot possiby be a gambler."

"But I am a gambler," returned Milnthorpe almost savagely, as he stood up, wildly gesticulating; "a confirmed gambler of the worst sort. When I came here penniless, a year or more since, I had just been cleaned out at the very place where I have again lost every centime I possessed—painfully saved all this time for that very purpose. I inherited a fortune; I have made money in business—all went in the same way. Don't reason with me; don't tell me what a fool I am. No reason can be so severe as my own conscience. I am worse than a fool; I am a villain. I have been a curse to others as well as myself. My poor old mother, a dear girl whom I should have married—but no, I was not villain enough for that. . . . I cannot help it, Balmaine. God knows how I try. But I have long lucid intervals, when, as you have seen, I can be as sensible as anybody. Then the madness breaks out again. And so it will be to the end of the chapter. I am a ruined man—not merely moneyless, that is nothing—but ruined morally."

"Don't say that, old man," said Alfred, now more surprised even than before. "I refuse to believe that you are incurable. You have plenty of

character; and if you really resolve to conquer this propensity, I am sure you will succeed. If I can help you any way——"

"Help me! How can you help me? I am incurable!" exclaimed Milnthorpe excitedly. "But stay, there is one thing. I am not an extravagant chap. I can save money, and as fast as I lay it by I will send it to you in London; and you must make me this promise—not to let me have it on any consideration whatever, unless I come for it myself."

"Rather a strange trust," returned Balmaine; "but to help you, I will accept it."

"It will help me, by keeping temptation far off. Saxon is so near that if I have a few hundred francs by me I am sure to go there, sooner or later. But if I can only have money by fetching it from London—that might make a difference."

"Give time for reflection?"

"Say rather, for the mad fit to wear itself out. I am always reflecting. I am thankful for your sympathy—from most people I should have had only blame. Yes, I will try again. And perhaps I can do something for you. I have long been estranged from most of my friends, as you may easily believe; but there is a man in London now in a position of considerable influence, whom I once laid under a great obligation. I will give you

a letter of introduction to him; he may be of use to you."

"Is he a journalist?"

"No; he is in business in the City. But see him; it will be worth your while. He owes me a good turn, and I shall tell him that what he does for you I shall consider done for myself. But say as little about me as you can—merely that I am living a quiet life here in Switzerland."

The letter was written, and Alfred, without looking at the address, put it into his pocket.

CHAPTER VII.

SENSE AND SENTIMENT.

Vera and Cora are in the apartment which the former calls her studio, a spacious, nondescript sort of place—at once workroom, boudoir, and curiosity shop. The walls are covered with paintings, drawings, and sketches, some of them Vera's own work. There are also bronze and marble statuettes, plaster casts, a lay figure, and a large easel. The furniture is all good of its kind, but various in design, as if it had been picked up at sundry times and places—no two chairs being alike—and near a Louis Quatorze secretaire stands a wonderfully carved oaken bookcase, black with age and filled with richly-bound volumes.

Perfect silence reigns in the room, for it is beyond earshot of barrel-organs, and Vera is painting her friend's portrait, and very intent on her work she seems.

At length she pauses, and Cora profits by the opportunity to make an observation.

"I don't know whether you are tired of painting, but I know I am tired of sitting still, holding

my tongue and doing my best to look unconcerned."

"Very well," answered Vera with a smile, as she put down her pallet; "we have perhaps done enough for to-day. Let us talk, by all means. What about?"

"What pleasanter subject can we have than ourselves and those who belong to us?" said Cora, with an answering smile.

"At any rate, it is one that comes the most home to us. Now, let me hear your confession, for I fancy from your manner that you have something to tell me."

"Something to ask you, rather—though I have also something to tell you. I have been here several times—once or twice to dinner—yet I never meet any young men. How is it?"

"How should I know?" returned Vera with a look of surprise; "I do not invite Lady Leyton's guests, and if I did it would hardly be *comme il faut* for me to ask any men. Besides, we have young men sometimes; we had one last night, a Mr. Angel."

"Was he nice?"

"Charming, as an angel ought to be; and Lady Leyton tells me that he is engaged to an equally charming girl. And there were two young men to dinner on Tuesday."

"Were they nice?"

"Not very. One was taciturn and ugly, the other noisy and vulgar. Mr. Sydney apologised for them afterwards. He said they were business connections of his father's, whom he was occasionally obliged to invite. Yet now, when I think of it, I do meet very few young men, either here or at Mrs. Reginald's."

"Cannot you guess the reason?" asked Cora, with a very significant smile.

"I suppose because they know so few."

"That is not the reason, my dear. They don't want young men to come—that is the reason."

"But why?"

"But why! Oh! what an innocent you are! It is because of you."

"Because of me!" repeated Vera. "I don't think I should do the poor young men any harm."

Here Cora laughed outright.

"I am sure you would not," she said; "but then, don't you see, they might fall in love with you, or you with them, and that is what the Leytons don't want."

"Fall in love with them! I am sure I should not," answered Vera indignantly. "At any rate with anybody I have seen here."

"Not even with Mr. Sydney?" asked Cora mischievously.

"Why do you suggest anything so absurd?"

said Vera sharply, at the same time blushing somewhat, and, as Cora thought, seeming a little confused.

"Why do I suggest anything so absurd? I see no absurdity whatever in the idea, and I am sure the Leytons don't. They mean you two to marry, my dear."

"Nonsense!"

"No nonsense at all. I have thought so from the first time I called, when Lady Leyton asked me so many questions about my family, and whether I had brothers or cousins in London, and also about Mrs. Maitland's connections. If there was a young man in our house, you may depend upon it that he would not be allowed to come to Grosvenor Square, nor you to Bloomsbury Square. And what is more likely or natural than that Sir James and Lady Leyton should think you an eligible *parti* for their son?"

"Because I am rich, I suppose," said Vera with a scornful curl of her lip.

"That may not be the sole attraction. You have qualities of person and mind, my dear, that might win any man's heart."

"I do not want to win any man's heart," returned the other impatiently. "I have made up my mind not to marry."

"Please don't. I don't mean, don't marry; but don't say you won't marry, for when people say that,

the next news is sure to be that they are going to be."

"In that case I retract," laughed Vera. "I will make no resolution at all, or if I do, I shall keep it to myself. *Mais, revenons à nos moutons*, or, rather, *à notre mouton*, which in this case is Mr. Sydney. I do not think he is a marrying man."

"Why? I thought he seemed very attentive to you the other day."

"Oh, yes; he likes a little flirtation. But he does not seem particular with whom, and I heard him say one day that it is time enough for a fellow to marry when he has had his fling—whatever that may mean—and unless I do him injustice, his nature is rather shallow—he is not capable of feeling deep love."

"I quite agree with you; but that will not prevent him from marrying a rich wife if he can. You know whom I mean."

"I think I can guess"—smiling—"but all the same, I don't believe he will——" Here Vera hesitated.

"Propose to you," said Cora, finishing the sentence. "I am sure he will. Call me a false prophet if he does not, and before very long too. I wonder he has not done so already."

"And all for my fortune," sighed Vera. "It is a great trouble this fortune, Cora."

"Say, rather, a great blessing; and I think you

are beginning to appreciate the advantages which the possession of money confers. Confess, now, you would not have been pleased if these Calder people had gone on with the lawsuit and won the Hardy fortune."

"I should not. I freely admit that I should have been greatly disappointed, for several reasons."

"Well, there is no chance of that now; at least, everybody says so. And I cannot tell you how glad I am to know that you are dropping some of the fads you brought with you from Switzerland. I have no doubt your M. Senarclens is a very clever man, but he is certainly a visionary. It seems to me the very height of absurdity for a young girl in the springtide of life to make herself wretched because she is the inheritor of a great fortune. Rather rejoice at the means it gives you of doing good, both to yourself and others. Take one instance alone. You love art. Is it not much better to paint, as you do, for love of your work, than to work for bread? I wish I were in the same position. Then I should be independent of publishers, editors, and everybody, and do my work in my own way and my own time."

"Yet it must be very pleasant to know that you are earning your own living. You are sure then that you are doing something useful, that you are not throwing your time away. You write, for instance, and your articles and stories find accept-

ance. There must therefore be some good in them. I paint and sketch, yet I am never quite sure about the quality of my work. People praise it, I know; some because they think it polite, others because I am rich, and one or two, perhaps," smiling, "because they love me."

"You are growing positively cynical, Vera. To which of these categories do you assign me, may I ask?"

"Can you ask, Cora? You are the only person I know to whom I can open my heart and speak as to a dear sister—my best, my only friend," and as Vera spoke, she took her friend's hand lovingly in hers.

"And for that reason you think I am a partial judge. Well, perhaps I am. All the same, I feel quite sure that you are a clever artist, and could, if it were necessary, make a far better income with your pencil than I can make with my pen; and I think I can prove it to you. I have an idea——"

"Yes, what is it?"

"I will tell you. You know I am doing a good deal just now for the great publishing house of Peter, Paul, and Piper. They bring out whole libraries of illustrated books and employ quite an army of artists. Now, if you will let me, I will show one of the art editors some of your sketches, and ask if he can give the sketcher, a friend of mine, some work."

"That will be splendid!" exclaimed Vera gleefully. "But you will not tell him——"

"That you are an heiress. Certainly not; nor your name. But what name shall I give?"

"Miss Leonino. I am English, of course, but of Italian extraction."

"Nothing could be better. I will take the sketches with me to-morrow, and tell you what Peter, Paul, and Piper say the next time I come."

"And let the next time be very soon, *ma chère amie*, for I shall be impatient both to see you and hear your news. But I was forgetting; you have something to tell me."

"Have I?"

"You said so."

"Ah! now I remember. It is about that foolish cousin of mine. I thought it might interest you to know, you know——"

"Yes!" said Vera eagerly.

"That he has lost his situation, and the chance of earning £500 a year."

"Then he is no more editor of the *Helvetic News*."

"Only until the arrival of his successor."

"I am very sorry. It seemed such a nice position for him. Why is he giving it up?"

Cora told her.

"How noble!" exclaimed Vera enthusiastically. "He gives up everything—work that he likes, his

means of living—rather than swerve from the path of honour. I admire your cousin, Cora."

"So do I. Yet, all the same, he is a misguided young man."

"In what way?"

"Not for sticking to his principles, but for abandoning the belief in which he was brought up. Why could he not live and die a Tory, like his father before him? He says that foreign travel, his sojourn in Switzerland, and further thought, have made him a Liberal. I don't think a sojourn in Switzerland would make me a Liberal. I love our old England, Vera; I am proud of her glorious history and great renown, of her vast empire and far-reaching influence. And believing that we are indebted for all these things to our ancient monarchy and to the patriotism and courage of our aristocracy, I am naturally a Conservative. These Radicals would reform all our institutions out of existence, set up a shoddy Republic, with perhaps a cotton-spinner for president, and utterly destroy the continuity of our national history. I don't understand how Alfred can be so blind. I only hope that when he comes back he will see things in a different light, and return to the political faith in which he was brought up."

"I know so little of English politics that it would be presumptuous for me to give an opinion," said Vera quietly; "but as between monarchies and

republics, my sympathies are certainly with republics."

"That is natural enough; you were brought up in a republic—a very Conservative one, by the way. But when you have lived here a little longer, I hope you will think differently—at any rate so far as England is concerned—and help me to reconvert Alfred."

"He is coming to London, then?"

"He must; he has his living to get, you know."

"Yes, I know," answered Vera thoughtfully; and then taking up her pallet she gave a few touches to her friend's unfinished portrait.

Cora seemed surprised.

"I thought you had finished?" she said.

"So I had; but it just struck me that the shading of this finger is a little too dark, and I had better alter it before I forget. . . . Oh! Cora, dear," again laying down her palette, "I feel so powerless!"

"I expect we all do, more or less. None of us, with our own unaided strength, can effect very much. But when you say you are powerless, you mean, I suppose, that you would like to do something. What is it?"

"I would like," said Vera, hesitatingly; "I would like so very much . . . How shall I put it? I who do nothing, except for my own pleasure, have wealth and a large income. You have only

what you earn. Your betrothed is a private soldier in India. You cannot marry because you are poor. Why should this be, Cora? Why cannot I share my fortune with you and make you both happy? And there is your noble cousin, who has sacrificed his prospects to his principles, and may now find it hard even to live—why cannot I help him?"

"For several reasons, Vera. If I know Alfred, he is too proud, or, as you would say, he has too high a sense of dignity and honour, to accept money without rendering something in return, to become the pensioner of anybody—at any rate, while he has health and strength to fight his own way; and he believes that he has. And as for George and myself, we are quite content to wait for better times; he is not a common soldier, let me tell you, but a sergeant. We are both young, and if we are able to marry in a few years we shall do very well. I thank you very much for thinking of us, but——"

"Always those buts," interposed Vera impatiently. "Why need you wait all these weary years? Let him come home and I will—what do you call it?—make a settlement on you. He can find a career here."

"You are very good, my dear; but I'm sure George would not like to leave the army, and I should not like to ask him. We must wait. I have enough to keep me, while he with his sergeant's Indian pay is quite rich."

"I wish I were not quite so rich," returned Vera with a grieved look. "I said just now that I should have been sorry for these Calder people to succeed, and I have so many schemes for the employment of my fortune, that it would be a real disappointment to lose it. But if my schemes are all to come to naught, I do think, Cora, I would rather lose it than keep it."

"Oh, no you would not!"

"And I should be saved the worry and the responsibility."

"Not by losing your fortune, I hope," said Cora, rising from her chair as an intimation that it was time for her to leave. "There is a better way than that. The burden of a great fortune is almost too heavy for a young girl, I freely admit. You must share it with another—one, if he can be found, whose love for the heiress is as great as his indifference to her fortune, yet who will give his best energies to its wise and faithful disposal."

Vera's only reply was a grave shake of the head and a wistful, almost pathetic smile, as if she deemed so happy an ending of her trouble too improbable for discussion.

"And to console you a little," continued Cora as they went towards the door, "I promise that when George comes home, if we want a little money for furniture, or that, or any other necessary purpose, we will make you our banker."

CHAPTER VIII.

CORA'S PLAN.

VERA and Cora had become fast friends. A mutual attraction drew them to each other at their first meeting, and their intimacy had grown with every subsequent interview. Cora soon saw that albeit Vera was made so much of by the Leytons and surrounded by so many luxuries, she was practically alone in the world, with nobody to warn her against its temptations and protect her from its dangers, rendered so much greater in her case by her wealth, her strange training, and her enthusiastic temperament. And Cora pitied the girl, taking to her all the more readily that she, like her, had no congenial acquaintance of her own age and sex. Vera, on her part, found in Cora somebody on whom she could lean, to whom, as she herself said, she could open her heart, and reveal without restraint her perplexities, her anxieties, and her troubles. For Cora, though not very much older than the heiress, knew more of the world and its ways, while the trials she had undergone had strengthened her character and made her thoughtful above her years. Vera could not have had a wiser counsellor or a more useful com-

panion. The elder girl's sound sense and conservative instincts were the best possible correctives for her friend's wild theories and too generous disposition. Her chief fear was that Vera would either be snapped up by some mere fortune-hunter who knew how to ape the virtues she most admired, or that, escaping this peril, she might become the prey of cunning impostors and scheming philanthropists, and waste her substance without benefiting her fellow-creatures. Against these dangers she resolved, if possible, to guard her, a design in which she had so far been greatly blessed by circumstances. Vera's visits to the East End had of late become much less frequent, partly because she once or twice had been egregiously taken in, partly because Sir James Leyton, who viewed these expeditions with little favour, and was addicted on occasions to the use of strong language, roundly declared that, although the trustees would let her have whatever money in reason might be needful to keep up her position, they could not undertake to keep all the beggars in Bermondsey, and all the thieves in the New Cut. For as Vera never went on a mission of charity that she did not empty her purse—often against Mrs. Maitland's wish—her demands on the trustees assumed alarming proportions, and she was compelled to hold her hand. One day, being in the neighbourhood of Pitman's Rents, they were prevailed upon by a ragged

little girl to see her mother, whom she described as dying of want. They found the woman and a second little girl in a den, if possible, more horrible than any they had yet seen, and Vera's compassion was excited beyond measure. She gave the usual sovereign, and promised to come again and make some permanent provision for the poor creature; but before they reached home she missed both her purse and her watch. Mrs. Maitland insisted on informing the police, who were not long in ascertaining that the little girl's story was a wretched fiction, the dying woman a professional thief, and the whole affair, as the police put it, "a regular plant."

Vera had been some time in London before it became generally known where she lived and how much she was supposed to be worth. For society papers were not yet. But at length an enterprising journalist got hold of a garbled version of her story, and with a few adornments, developed from his inner consciousness, printed it. As a natural consequence the poor girl became speedily involved in a portentous correspondence. Every post brought her an avalanche of circulars, pamphlets, and letters, all of them, of course, being appeals for money. Some of the letters were so pitiful that they wrung Vera's soul, and if she might have pleased herself she would have answered every one of them with a cheque. But at that rate, as Sir James showed her, she would have got rid of her income, large as it

was (if it had been at her own disposal), in about a week. And then he introduced his ward to an officer of the Mendicity Society, who pronounced nearly all the letters she had received to be the work of swindlers. In one case—that of the *soi-disant* widow of a lately deceased clergyman, with a consumptive daughter and a crippled boy—to whom Vera had sent five pounds, the society prosecuted the writer, a burly ruffian who lived on the fat of the land, to conviction, and made him do a term of hard-labour.

These two incidents were a sore trouble to Vera, and, though she did not allow them to make any change in her ideals, they lessened her confidence in her own impulses and the soundness of some of M. Senarclens' theories. For faith in the goodness of human nature was a leading article in the historian's creed, and she began to see that among the poor, as among the rich, human nature had a very base side. A great many more people seemed to want to get hold of her money wrongly than to help her to spend it righteously. In this fact M. Senarclens would have found further proof of the pernicious influence of wealth, and the need for its forcible distribution; but when she said as much to her friend, Cora observed that even if private property were an evil —which she was far from admitting—it by no means followed that robbery was right; a conclusion that Vera was too clear-headed to dispute.

Cora's plan for shielding Vera from harm, and protecting her fortune from matrimonial wreckers, was to marry her to Alfred Balmaine. But in this there was no self-seeking, no mere desire to promote her cousin's interest by providing him with a rich wife. She knew that Alfred was a true man, and believed that he was developing into a strong one. She felt as sure that he would make Vera a good husband as that she would make him a good wife, and she saw no other way of securing her friend's happiness. And more than her happiness—the free growth of her noble nature and attainment of such of her ideals as experience might prove to be practicable—for in Vera's character Cora discerned great possibilities, and was earnestly wishful that she should turn her opportunities to the best account. But if the girl remained with the Leytons, above all if she married Sydney—whom Cora had set down as frivolous and selfish, if not positively vicious—she would be rendered powerless for good and her fine character irretrievably spoiled. It was to hinder this consummation that Cora had warned her friend against Sydney, and suggested marriage with a man worthy of her love as the best means of insuring her peace of mind and meeting the difficulties with which she was beset. She hoped that Vera would see this man in her cousin, for whom she had evidently a kindly if not even a warmer feeling, and it would be strange if Alfred had not a tender

place in his heart for the fair girl whose acquaintance he had made in circumstances so strange and romantic. When he came to London she would bring the two together, and give them every opportunity to fall in love. And she wanted him to come, for albeit she had warned Vera against Sydney Leyton, and Vera was not blind to the latter's faults, he knew how to make himself agreeable, and saw her every day, advantages that could hardly be overestimated. Cora fancied, moreover, from her friend's manner, that although he might not have actually proposed he had foreshadowed, in some unmistakable way, his intention of doing so. This was the only serious danger Cora apprehended, for albeit Vera would almost certainly refuse him in the first instance, importunity might, in the absence of some strong countervailing influence, ultimately prevail. The opposition that her scheme, if it were known, would encounter from Sir James and Lady Leyton concerned Cora little. She had no idea of taking them into her confidence; Vera was growing older every day; she would soon be of age, and the girl was of so loving and constant a temper that if she once plighted her troth not all the trustees and guardians in the world would persuade her to go back from her word.

Much, perhaps everything, depended on Alfred's speedy arrival.

In the meanwhile one of the events antici-

pated by Cora came to pass—Sydney Leyton proposed.

As touching rising and breakfast the habits of the Leyton household were somewhat irregular. It was a long time before Vera could reconcile herself to getting up at eight and eating an English breakfast at nine o'clock. At La Boissière she had hardly ever been in bed after five, and for some time after coming to London she awoke regularly at that hour—sometimes even did so still, and painted or wrote two or three hours before anybody in the house was astir, but she gradually fell into the ways of the family, and now seldom appeared down-stairs before nine o'clock, when she breakfasted with Sir James, for Lady Leyton breakfasted in bed, and got up at eleven. The Knight being mostly in a hurry to get to business ate quickly, and left Vera to finish her repast at leisure and alone. For she was rarely joined by Sydney, and had only the vaguest idea either when he went to bed or at what time he rose. But there were rumours in the house that he sometimes did not come home until four or five o'clock in the morning, and that Shands (the butler) often took up his brandy and soda (with which beverage Mr. Sydney generally began the day) between twelve and one P.M. As, moreover, he almost always lunched at his club, and frequently dined out, there were days together when Vera did not set eyes on the young fellow. Breakfast was

the last meal at which she expected to see him, and when one morning, shortly after Cora's visit, he appeared on the scene just as his father's brougham was leaving the door, she was not a little surprised. She offered to pour out his tea for him, an offer which he accepted with an unnecessary profusion of thanks.

Sydney did not look nearly so well as when he first returned from his *tour du monde*. His burnt brick complexion had become the colour of a flagstone; he had shaved his beard, thereby revealing a rather retreating chin and an undershot lip. He had grown thinner, too, and looked both a smaller man and less manly than of yore. London life was telling on him.

These were Vera's thoughts as she poured out Mr. Leyton's tea. She noticed, too, that he seemed preoccupied, and was less talkative than usual; which was perhaps because his father had spoken to him the night before rather sharply about his lavish expenditure, and told him that he must pull up and settle down; for the old Knight, though rich, had no idea of letting even his favourite son make ducks and drakes of his money. This incident had turned the young man's thoughts to Miss Hardy, and accounted for his early rising. He knew the coast was more likely to be clear at that time than at any other, and he had resolved to make her his wife, so that he might spend as much money as he liked without

fear of incurring paternal admonition. But he had not quite resolved how to pop the momentous question, and though doubting little as to the result he could not help feeling just a little nervous. Hence his taciturnity.

Beside Vera's plate was a portentous pile of letters and circulars, all either containing requests for money or invitations to patronize something which involved giving. Most of them, by Sir James Leyton's advice, were left unnoticed; the few to which replies were deemed expedient being answered by a lithographed letter, in the Knight's name, to the effect that as Miss Hardy was a minor she had no money at her disposal for the purpose in question.

"These people seem to worry you as much as ever," said Sydney, as he sipped his tea: "why, you get as many letters as a Minister of State."

"Too many. They made me unhappy at first; but now I am getting used to them. All the same, they must be looked over, there might be something important among them—private letters, for instance—but circulars I throw into my waste paper basket unopened."

"They are a great nuisance. You should really have somebody to take this trouble off your hands, Miss Hardy," and as he spoke he drew his chair a little nearer to hers.

"I think less of the trouble than of the lost time

and wasted money. The price of this paper and these postage stamps would keep a poor man a week. I wonder how much is spent in London every year in making appeals for charity? It seems a great shame."

"You are quite right. It is a great shame. And some of these so-called charitable organizations are great swindles, kept up solely for the benefit of officials. They help themselves, and defraud the poor—defraud them of some thousands a year. I sometimes think that I should like to devote myself to exposing the depredations of these people, and vindicating the rights of the disinherited."

The chair came still nearer.

"It would be a noble task," said Vera, rather surprised at this outburst, for Sydney had delivered himself with considerable energy.

"Let us undertake it together, Vera. Let us work hand in hand." (Here the chair was drawn nearer still.) "I know your views, and sympathise with your aims. More, Vera, I admire you. I love you with all my heart. I know you are too good for me, but I will do my utmost to render myself worthy of the love and confidence—both love and confidence—which I hope you will not refuse me;" and he tried to slip his arm round her waist, but Vera, pushing her chair back, evaded him.

"You act the part very well, Mr. Sydney," she said, laughing; "very well indeed."

"I do not understand. What part do you mean?" he asked, with a nonplussed look.

"The part of an enamoured swain."

"It is no part at all. I am awfully in earnest, Vera. I admire you. I love you with all my heart."

"So you said just now. You have had your fling, then?"

"I beg your pardon, but really you know——" stammered the young man, turning very red.

"I happened to hear you say that you should not marry until you had had your fling, so I thought——"

"That—that was only a joke, you know. But I am in earnest, real earnest. I am, indeed. Won't you take compassion on me, Vera? Ever since we first met I have admired you. I love you with—from—yes, from the bottom of my heart. Believe me, I——"

"I think I have heard something of that sort before," said Vera, smiling at his confusion. "But had you not better wait until I am of age and come into my fortune? Those Calder people may possibly go on with the suit after all—and win it."

"No, they won't," exclaimed the young fellow eagerly. "I have satisfied myself on that score. Your fortune is quite safe."

"I am glad you think so, Mr. Sydney," returned Vera quietly. But there was a touch of sarcasm in

her manner, and her voice which suggested to Sydney that he was making rather a mess of it.

"I mean—I should love you all the same, fortune or no fortune," he said desperately. "It is you, your own precious self, I care for. Will you not listen to me, Vera? Won't you say yes?"

"Not at present. I have not had my fling yet;" and with a merry laugh she tripped lightly from the room.

"Confound it," muttered Sydney angrily, "what a fool I have made of myself! I had no idea proposing was such a confoundedly awkward business. What rot I did talk, to be sure! And that was a deuced awkward slip about the fortune. However, she did not refuse me; that is one comfort. I must try again. There is nothing like perseverance, my father says."

CHAPTER IX.

DISAPPOINTMENTS.

BEFORE leaving Geneva Alfred Balmaine informed the manager of the *Day* of his approaching departure, and that, after a time which he mentioned, he should be reluctantly compelled to discontinue his connection with the paper in Switzerland, but he ventured to express the hope that he might be permitted to resume it in London.

The reply he received was prompt and gracious. The manager greatly regretted that Alfred was leaving Geneva, thanked him for his contributions, hoped to have the pleasure of seeing him on his arrival in London, and more than hinted, as Alfred thought, an intention to give him a permanent place on the editorial staff.

This letter removed a weight from Balmaine's mind. A position on the *Day* would be a living and something more. There was no telling to what it might not lead, and he probably built more castles in the air than the circumstances altogether warranted. Anxiety about his future was dismissed, and he resolved to travel to England through North

Switzerland and South Germany, do the Rhine country, and possibly see something of Belgium and Holland. The journey thus lengthened might cost him a few pounds more, but considering that he was now almost sure of a place on the staff of the *Day*, he felt that he could well afford the outlay, and it might be a long time before he had another equally favourable opportunity of enlarging his experience by Continental travel.

So a fortnight after the arrival of his successor he took leave of Geneva, and set out on his travels, first writing to Cora that he should probably reach London in two or three weeks, but that he could not quite fix the day, and that she must expect him when she saw him; he meant to take her by surprise.

Balmaine enjoyed his tour immensely, especially in the grand country of the Vörder Rhone and the Black Forest; but it made a larger hole in his pocket than he had reckoned on, and if he had been less sanguine about getting a place, the lightness of his purse would have caused him serious misgivings. In any case it was only prudent to husband his resources, so instead of going to a big hotel he put up at an inn in Finsbury Pavement, which being recommended to him by one Switzer and kept by another, was not likely to be very expensive.

The morning after his arrival he went to the office of the *Day*, not without a sense of misgiving,

for as the critical moment drew near doubts as to the issue on which he had hitherto so confidently counted began to rise in his mind. What if he should not get a place after all! And as he had never before had an interview with so important a personage as the manager or editor of a great daily paper, he rather feared this one would be as difficult to approach as a Minister of State, and as sparing of words as an ancient oracle. But he had hardly sent in his card when he was asked to step upstairs and ushered by a remarkably courteous attendant into the great man's room. He found in Mr. Nonpareil a plain-visaged, bald-headed gentleman, more than middle-aged, sitting before a large writing-table between two huge letter-baskets. As Alfred went forward to take his outstretched hand, it struck him that if the famous manager were to doff his coat and put on an apron, he would be the very *beau ideal* of a country greengrocer. And the manager's manner was as homely as his appearance. He requested his guest to take a seat, said how pleased he was to make his acquaintance, and spoke so warmly about his services to the paper, that the young fellow felt quite reassured, and saw himself in imagination one of the *Day's* sub-editors or reporters, possibly a leader-writer, and he had heard that the pay of a leader-writer was £1,500 a year. Mr. Nonpareil made many inquiries about Switzerland, asked his guest's opinion about France and the

probability of a revolution in Spain, and kept him a long time in talk without once referring to the subject nearest to his heart. At length Alfred, unable to bear the suspense longer, answered a not very clear exposition of the manager's views on the land question by mentioning that he had come to London in search of employment, and reminding him of the hope he had held out of finding him a place.

"I don't think I said that," replied Mr. Nonpareil, his manner suddenly becoming hard and unsympathetic. "I said I should be glad to secure your services."

"I beg your pardon," said Balmaine, feeling himself grow hot all over, "but is not that pretty much the same thing?"

"Not at all. I should be glad to secure your services if it were in my power—if you were to return to Geneva, for instance, or there was a suitable opening here. But I am sorry to say there is not. There is hardly work for the present staff, and I think we have the names of some fifteen hundred eligible candidates on our list."

"No chance for me, then," said Alfred, in a voice faint with disappointment.

"I fear not, at present," returned the manager, in his more kindly manner. "At any rate, not on the staff. But the paper is always open to you, and any contributions you may offer will receive favourable

consideration. Should anything arise of a more — of a more permanent character, I will let you know."

"And that is all!" said Alfred. The words literally escaped him. They were the involuntary expression of his thoughts, and were no sooner uttered than he became aware of their impropriety.

"And a good deal, too," returned Mr. Nonpareil sharply. "There are hundreds of journalists in London who would only be too glad to be numbered amongst the *Day's* outside contributors, and have their names in my book. What is your address? I may have occasion to communicate with you."

Balmaine gave him the address of Cora's lodgings in Bloomsbury, and after a friendly hand-shake from the manager, took his leave.

It was a terrible blow for the young fellow. His spirits fell at once below zero, and the confidence and elation with which he had been rather unreasonably buoyed up gave place to a sense of depression more unreasonable still. He walked along Fleet Street, looking neither to the right nor the left, so unconscious of what was passing around him that, as he crossed over to Chancery Lane, he narrowly escaped becoming the victim of a reckless hansom cabman.

"The paper is always open to me!" he soliloquised bitterly. "So it is to anybody who can write a readable article, which takes the editor's fancy. What a fool I was to take what Nonpareil

said about securing my services *au serieux*. It meant no more than the 'your obedient servant' with which he concludes his letters, and putting my name in his book is just humbug. It was a mere bit of politeness, and I shall never hear from him again. No more *Day* for me. And I have barely fifty pounds left. What shall I do when that is done? If I only knew somebody who could give me a word of counsel or, better still, a few introductions!"

And then he bethought him of Furley, and the idea crossed his mind to call on that shrewd and successful journalist and ask his advice. But the idea was conceived only to be dismissed. Furley could neither understand his scruples nor sympathise with his views, and he would certainly think, perhaps roundly tell him, that he was an arrant fool for leaving the *Helvetic News*, and decline to help further a man who let principle stand in the way of advancement. He would go and see Cora. She was more sensible than a good many men, and a talk with her might help to raise his spirits.

But another disappointment was in store for him. He did not find his cousin at home. She had gone for a few days to Hastings with Mrs. Maitland, whose labours among the poor had impaired her health. The maid who answered the bell gave him Cora's address, and thought Miss Balmaine would be back the day but one following.

It was not much, and Alfred felt vexed with himself for letting the incident affect his spirits; but he could not help it, and his depression became greater. He had counted so much on a talk with Cora, and now he should not see her for two, perhaps for three or four days. But it was his own fault. Why had he not come straight to London, instead of fooling away his money in Continental travel?

Turning away from Bloomsbury Square, he wandered mechanically westward, without thinking whither he was going, and went on till he reached Hyde Park. By this time he had become tired, for the day was warm and the flags were hot, so he sat down on a convenient seat and proceeded to solace himself with a smoke. But as he was on the point of lighting up he hesitated. The contents of his cigar-case were part of a lot he had brought from Geneva, and though of a very fair quality, had cost him only ten centimes each.

"Can I afford it?" he thought. "The next cigar I buy—whenever that may be—will cost me threepence or fourpence. I must make this go a long way, and—yes—I will buy a pipe and a few ounces of common tobacco. But this must certainly be the last cigar to-day."

As he threw down his match he happened to look up, and saw something which effectually diverted

the current of his thoughts, and put out his pipe in more senses than one.

Miss Hardy was riding past on a thoroughbred horse, accompanied by a gentleman equally well-mounted, and followed by a belted groom. Her companion seemed to be paying her great attention, and right well Vera looked. Her cheeks were rosy with exercise, her eyes sparkled with pleasure, and her riding-habit set off her fine figure to perfection. She did not see Alfred, and as she and her companion cantered towards Rotten Row his thoughts grew bitterer than ever.

"I do not think she would have noticed me if she had seen me," he said to himself. "Why should she? I am a poor devil of a journalist out of place and she is a millionaire heiress. True, I put her in the way of getting her fortune—but what does that matter? I wonder if she is engaged to that fellow. It looks so. He seems very devoted and she delighted. *Tant mieux.* She is nothing to me, and never can be. I made up my mind to that long ago. Why should I let it worry me? I won't. I will think about something else."

A vain resolution. He could think about nothing else, and so far forgot himself as to smoke a second and even a third cigar without its once occurring to him that he was committing an extravagance. But after a while he came to his senses, and wended his

way towards Finsbury Pavement (an omnibus would have cost him fourpence), and as a further measure of economy, he dined at a confectioner's shop on a cup of chocolate, a chunk of brown bread, and a lightly boiled egg, by which, as compared with dining at the Edelweiss Hotel, he saved eighteenpence, and spent the evening in smoking a pipe and making vain efforts to read the evening papers.

His campaign in London had opened badly, and he went to bed full of gloomy forebodings, and passed a restless and dreamful night.

CHAPTER X.

MILNTHORPE'S FRIEND.

THE next day Balmaine, whose "white night," to use a French phrase, had still further lowered his spirits, called on Warton. The managing clerk, who did not know he had left Geneva, though delighted to see him, was beyond measure surprised to learn that he had severed his connection with the *Helvetic News*, and evidently thought him a great fool for giving up so good a position for so inadequate a cause.

"What difference does it make to you which side the paper takes?" he said. "A journalist should be like an advocate—plead for the side which retains him."

Alfred in his depression began to think that he perhaps had been a fool. So far, at least, as he was concerned, honesty did not seem to be proving the best policy which he could have adopted. But seeing that Warton could neither understand his scruples nor enter into his feelings, he let the subject drop, and inquired what was the latest news from Calder.

"Saintly Sam and the Hardy Fortune Company are knocked into a cocked hat," said the clerk gleefully. "Ferret is as mad as a meat axe, and the Hon. Tom thinks he has been regularly taken in, and would jilt Lizzie if he dared."

"They are engaged then?"

"Rather; and the Hon. Tom is going to stand for Calder at the next election. He does not like the idea of losing his share of the fortune though, and his people don't much like the match, I am told. But if he does not stand to his guns, Sam will 'breach' him to a dead certainty; and Ferret, you may be sure, would make him pay swinging damages."

"Has the Fortune Company collapsed then?"

"Not altogether. Sam and Ferret still show fight. But it is all gammon, and they know it. Bless you, they haven't a leg to stand on. Even if they could prove their John Hardy to be the John Hardy, what would it amount to? The estate is distinctly bequeathed to Miss Vera Hardy, and she will get it, my boy. What will she stand, do you think?"

"Stand! What do you mean?"

"How much will she give us when she comes of age? It won't be long."

"I have no idea, Warton. But I am sure she will deal liberally with you."

"And you? You have done the lion's share of

the work, and deserve the lion's share of the reward."

"I won't take a penny from her—not a penny!" said Alfred emphatically. "What do you take me for?"

"I could tell you," replied the clerk drily; "but you might not like it. But I know one thing—if I were you I would take her. That is the reward you ought to have."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Balmaine severely. "How do you like your place?"

"Excellent well. Old Artful is a trump. We can get on capitally. And there is always something going on here. It is not like dull old Calder, and I am better off than ever I was in my life. We have got a comfortable shanty up Notting Hill way, and the family seems to have reached its maximum —thank heaven for that! Won't you come and take pot-luck with us to-night? Say half-past six. Mary will be awfully glad to see you. Here is my address" (exhibiting his card).

The invitation was accepted, and the two friends spent the evening in talking about Calder and old times; Alfred being further entertained with an amusing narration of Mrs. Warton's impressions of London, and an account of the remarkable sayings and doings of little Tommy, the managing clerk's son and heir.

On the day following Balmaine made another

visit to Bloomsbury Square, and to his great satisfaction found Cora at home.

Her sharp eyes were not long in detecting the uneasiness of his mind, and the two had no sooner exchanged greetings than she asked him plumply what was wrong.

He told her of his interview with the manager of the *Day*, but said nothing of his meeting with Vera in the Park, albeit, in spite of his utmost efforts, this incident was causing him much more disquiet than the other, which, now that he had taken time to think, he no longer looked upon as the terrible misfortune it had at first appeared.

Cora laughed.

"Why, Alfred," she said, "I gave you credit for more spirit. The *Day* is not the only paper in the world, and you have it all before you—the world, I mean—and you have time to turn round. Your money is not all done?"

"Nearly," returned Alfred dolefully. "When I have paid my bill at the inn I shall not have more than forty-five pounds left."

"Forty-five pounds! Why, what have you to mope about? How many scores of thousands are there in London who, with forty-five pounds would consider themselves passing rich; how many who, to have your youth and health and brains, would give all they possess! Forty-five pounds, will keep you twenty-two weeks—perhaps longer if your are

very careful—and surely by that time you will be able to make more than a hundred a year. I will introduce you to Peter, Paul, and Piper. They are very nice people, and can, perhaps, find you something to do. And if I were you I should certainly send some articles to the *Day*."

"I mean to do," said Balmaine briskly. "I thought at first that Nonpareil's saying the paper was open to me was, like the rest, a piece of humbug. But perhaps he meant it. Anyhow I shall try. There are a good many Swiss papers at the inn. I fancy Swiss subjects will have the best chance, and I shall knock a few articles together. I had better do that than nothing, even if they should not be accepted."

"Decidedly. But you must not stay at the hotel, cheap as it is. You can find quarters in this neighbourhood a good deal cheaper—in Regent's Square, for instance, there are always lodgings to let. And I am sure, when you get known—which will, of course, take a little time, you will do very well. Why, I am making more than three pounds a week myself, and you as an experienced journalist ought to do far better.

"Experienced journalist!" returned Alfred, rather bitterly. "Why experienced journalists absolutely swarm, the *Day* alone has the names of 1,500 applicants on its list."

"Yes, and I daresay three-fourths of them are

good for nothing, and never wrote a line, much less a leader, in their lives, whereas you have won your spurs and can show excellent credentials. All the same, I think you have been very foolish—not in giving up your place if you could not conscientiously keep it, no true Balmaine would do otherwise—but in deserting the old flag. However, I will say nothing about that now. But there is no reason in the world for despondency, or even discouragement."

After some more talk, Alfred set out on his hunt for lodgings, which he found, as Cora had suggested he might, in Regent's Square, and a close calculation showed him that he could live, and not uncomfortably within the amount she had mentioned—two pounds a week. Before he went she asked him to take afternoon tea with her and Mrs. Maitland on the day but one following.

"You will perhaps meet somebody you know," she said.

"Somebody from Calder?" he asked.

Cora shook her head and smiled significantly.

"No. Nobody from Calder. You will see."

He asked no further questions, but he knew what she meant, and although he kept saying to himself that Vera was nothing to him and never could be, and his prospects were not a whit better than they had been the day before, he went away full of courage and hope.

After he had arranged about his lodgings Balmaine went to the Edelweiss Hotel to pay his bill and fetch away his belongings. While putting his papers together he came upon Milnthorpe's letter of introduction which, until that moment, he had entirely forgotten. It was addressed to "Abraham Wilkins, Esq., 55, Leadenhall Street."

"I will call with this to-morrow," thought Alfred. "I don't suppose anything will come of it, but it would not be courteous to old Milnthorpe not to present his letter."

Rather to his surprise he found Mr. Wilkins splendidly installed in an extensive suite of offices, occupied by troops of clerks. Milnthorpe's friend was evidently a financial or mercantile swell of the first water; but the letter acted as an open sesame, and Alfred was ushered at once into the great man's private room. As touching his personal presence, however, Mr. Wilkins was by no means a great man, being rather of the Tittlebat Titmarsh order of creation. But he had a big head on his rather narrow shoulders, and his keen grey eyes and massive jaws showed that he possessed in high measure both shrewdness and strength of will. His first question was concerning Milnthorpe, whereupon Alfred told Mr. Wilkins exactly what his friend had charged him to say.

"I am glad he's doing pretty well," said Wilkins, though dubiously, as if he were not quite sure of

the fact; "but if he would come here I think he might do very much better. However, if he cannot be persuaded, I suppose he must remain where he is. And now what can I do for you, Mr. Balmaine? I have no hesitation in saying that in times past I have been under great obligations to Mr. Milnthorpe, and if I can oblige you I shall only be too glad."

Alfred told him frankly that he was a journalist, very much in want of work.

"Well, I can perhaps do something for you," answered the merchant, after a moment's thought. "But not just now. I run down to Liverpool to-night, and sail for America to-morrow morning."

"For America!" exclaimed Alfred in surprise; thinking the something Wilkins proposed to do for him would be a long time in coming to pass.

"Oh, that is nothing," said the other smiling. "I shall not be more than four or five weeks away. When I come back I will drop you a line, and you will perhaps do me the pleasure of dining with me in Palace Gardens, Mr. Balmaine."

Alfred expressed his thanks and said he should be very glad, but he went away with little hope of help from Mr. Wilkins, and resolving for the future to expect nothing from anybody, and to win success by his own efforts.

CHAPTER XI.

GETTING ON.

VERA was there. The traditional lover is always supposed to appear at a trysting-place far too soon; but Balmaine did not show up at Bloomsbury Square until several minutes after the time his cousin had fixed. Truth to say, albeit he felt in his heart that he loved Miss Hardy, he did not consider himself in any sense an aspirant for her hand, and greatly doubting if it would conduce to his peace of mind to see her again, he hesitated for some time whether to keep the appointment or not. But he did keep it, and, despite his doubts, there can be no question that had he not found Vera at Mrs. Middleton's he would have been disappointed more than a little; for Alfred was not immaculate; he had not always the courage of his convictions, and people in love are seldom consistent.

She greeted him with all the cordiality of an old friend, and when they shook hands a slight, yet as Cora, who narrowly watched her, thought a tell-tale blush overspread her face and neck.

"What a long time it is since we have seen each

other!" she said, dropping inadvertently into a French idiom.

"It is not so long since I saw you though," answered Balmaine gaily, for the magic of her presence and the touch of her hand had for the nonce conjured away all his prudential resolutions.

"How—when?" asked the girl in surprise.

"On Monday afternoon in Hyde Park."

"Yes, I was out riding with Sydney Leyton on Monday. But how stupid of me not to see you! I am so sorry."

She spoke with evident sincerity; but it did not escape Balmaine that she mentioned her companion as "Sydney;" neither did the shade that passed over his face escape Cora.

"What a fine horse you ride, and how well you ride him!" said Alfred. "I had no idea you were such a horsewoman."

"Oh, I have learnt that and some other accomplishments since I came to England. Lady Leyton insisted on my taking some lessons in equitation, and Sir James bought me Reindeer. You like him?"

"Immensely. I saw no handsomer horse in the park. He is almost as handsome as his mistress."

"Come, he is getting on," thought Cora.

"Vous me moquez, Monsieur Balmaine," said Vera with a blush; yet she did not seem displeased. "But you are right about Reindeer. He is a fine

horse, and as good as he looks—as courageous as a lion, yet as gentle as a fawn. I can rule him with a word. I think he is as fond of me as I am of him."

"Fortunate Reindeer!" thought Balmaine.

"But, do you know," she continued, "I never feel quite comfortable when I am out riding."

"I am surprised at that. Why?"

"I cannot help thinking of the unfortunates who have no horses. And when I see some poor old man or woman trudging along, carrying a big pack or a huge basket, I almost feel as if I were doing wrong—that it is they, not I, who ought to have a horse."

"You foolish girl," put in Cora; "when will you have done with these nonsensical communistic ideas? What could your poor old woman do with Reindeer if she got him? Would he carry her and her basket, do you suppose?"

"Not very well," replied Vera smiling; "but the money it cost to buy and keep horses like Reindeer would keep a great many old women, *ma chère*, and it seems so selfish to be indulging in luxuries when so many of our fellow-creatures have not even necessaries."

"An admirable sentiment, Miss Hardy, but not to be accepted without a good deal of qualification," observed Balmaine. "If you, and everybody else who possesses a *cheval de luxe*, were to sell them, it

would make little perceptible difference in the sum of human misery—probably none whatever. And if all were like-minded, where would you find buyers? Thorough-bred horses are not of much use between the shafts of a cart. You would not like to have Reindeer shot, I suppose?"

"*Quelle horreur!* No," exclaimed Vera, "not for the world!"

"Then you or somebody else must keep him, and if you keep him you may as well ride him. And in keeping him you help to keep others. Your groom, for instance, and saddlers, harness-makers, farriers, farmers, labourers, and no end of people."

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Balmaine," answered the girl pensively, "and it is pleasant to think that keeping Reindeer is not only a pleasure to me but a benefit to others. I suspect, though" (smiling), "that a fallacy lurks somewhere in your argument. I should like to ask M. Senarclens what he thinks."

"Bother M. Senarclens!" interposed Cora impatiently. "That man is becoming a perfect nuisance. And do please cease arguing about a subject which I am sure neither of you understand. Let us have some music. I am sure Alfred would like to hear you play something, Vera. Would you not, Alfred?"

Alfred said there was nothing he should like better, unless it was to hear her sing.

He heard her do both, and, albeit Vera's execution left something to be desired, which, considering her opportunities, was perhaps not to be wondered at, she sang and played fairly—Alfred thought divinely, and he was enthusiastic in his praises. After a while Cora, seeing that matters were progressing to her satisfaction, made an excuse to leave the lovers (as she already chose to consider them) alone, and they had a delightful talk about Switzerland, the Jura, the Alps, and the lake, and Vera took an opportunity of saying how much she applauded his resolve to give up his place rather than be recreant to his principles, on which the young fellow was foolish enough to think (although he did not venture to say) that her approval more than repaid the loss and disappointment he had sustained.

The talk went on a long time, and would probably have gone on longer if it had not been interrupted by a loud knock at the door, followed by the announcement that Sir James Leyton's carriage had come for Miss Hardy.

When she was gone Balmaine asked his cousin whether he ought not to call on the Leytons.

"I would not if I were you," said Cora; "and I really do not see why you should."

"I am sure I don't want," returned Alfred carelessly. "They seem to be very grand folks, and grand folks are not much in my line."

"The Leytons are not, at any rate. They gauge

people by their wealth, and would look upon a poor journalist as a nobody. As for Vera, you will see her here. She generally comes on a Wednesday, sometimes oftener."

Balmaine made no answer. For though he had a strong feeling that the less he saw of Vera the better—if, as he meant to do, he remained true to his resolve—he could not bring himself to refuse the opportunity of meeting her offered by his cousin, and the following Wednesday, and a good many other Wednesdays, generally found him in Bloomsbury Square, and he was seldom disappointed in seeing Miss Hardy. Sometimes, when the Leytons chanced to be out, she spent the evening there, had high tea, followed by little improvised concerts, in which Balmaine, who sang a good song, took part; yet though he fell deeper and deeper in love, he gave Vera no other intimation of his feelings than a tender deference of manner and the homage of an admiration which he could not conceal.

Cora had meanwhile mentioned his name to her friends Peter, Paul, and Piper, and the firm granted him an interview and offered him work. It was not much—the translation of a French manual into English—and the pay was not high; for, as Mr. Piper explained to him, professional translators work for small pay, and there is generally so little profit in translated works that publishers cannot

afford a high rate of remuneration for them. But some translators' English is utterly destitute of style; and as Alfred wrote forcibly and well, the firm was willing to give him rather more than the ordinary rate.

"All the same," said Mr. Piper pleasantly, "I would not ask you to undertake it if you have anything better to do."

Alfred, frankly admitting that he had nothing better to do, accepted the offer and did the work —did it so well that Peter, Paul, and Piper gave him even a pound or two more than the highest rate they had bargained for, which was so very unlike a publisher that most people, especially those who are authors, will probably be disposed to doubt the statement. But the race of fair-dealing publishers is not quite extinct, and Peter, Paul, and Piper never adopted the sharp practices of their less scrupulous fellow-tradesmen; such as paying an unfortunate writer his royalties in a nine months' bill, or giving him no more for the copyright than they got from America for the advance sheets—and their ever increasing prosperity was a proof that fair dealing is the surest guarantee of success.

For the rest, Balmaine worked with all the energy inspired by the resolution he had taken to succeed in his calling, and not to be satisfied until he had attained a position at least equal to that which he had surrendered. He wrote several

articles every week, which were accepted in the proportion of about one to three. He made offerings to sundry journals, sent contributions to magazines, and proposed papers to the editors of monthly reviews, who either answered him by a note (lithographed beforehand), saying they regretted not being able to find room for his article, or not at all. Editors of reviews are the most inveterate of flunkeys; their contributors must either be lords or "lions," and as Balmaine was neither noble nor famous, he had no chance. All the same, he felt that he was getting on. By working ten or twelve hours a day he contrived to earn nearly as much as a shoeblack or crossing sweeper, and one way and another he could see his way to the end of the year. It was not so much that he was badly paid, as that so many of his articles were either rejected or their insertion unconscionably delayed.

CHAPTER XII.

CORA'S REMONSTRANCE.

VERA, albeit more restrained and less impulsive in her manner than when Balmaine had first known her, was always gracious and friendly, and she treated him with the unembarrassed frankness of a sister; but their relations remained on the old footing, for though Mrs. Maitland regarded them as almost affianced lovers, no word of love had, as yet, passed between them. But this state of things did not suit Cora's views at all. Delays were dangerous. Young Leyton might propose a second time; and if Vera got it into her head that Alfred did not care for her, she might be persuaded to accept the other. If, moreover, it should come to Lady Leyton's ears that Alfred was a frequent visitor at Bloomsbury Square, she would of a surety put a stop to Miss Hardy's visits. Altogether Miss Balmaine's match-making scheme was not making the progress she desired, and being a young woman of resolute will and earnestly solicitous for the happiness of her cousin and her friend, she took the former roundly to task for what she was pleased to call his stupidity.

"I wonder what you are thinking about, Alfred?" she said one day, when he put in an appearance half an hour before Vera was expected, and an hour before she came.

"Whether I shall earn thirty shillings or two pounds this week, and I can afford myself a new overcoat," he answered with affected seriousness.

"You may afford yourself a good many overcoats if you will only act as you ought," she said going, as was her wont, straight to the point.

"As how, dear coz?"

"Propose to Vera."

"That would not be acting as I ought."

"Why? You love her."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. Do you think I am blind? You love the very ground she treads on."

"Well, Cora, I have never had any secrets from you," returned Balmaine gravely, after a long pause, "and I will not deny that Vera is very dear to me. But what difference does that make? Here I am, a poor devil of a journalist, earning with the utmost difficulty thirty or forty shillings a week. How can I ask a girl with I don't know how much money to link her fate with mine? What would the world say?"

"That you were a very lucky fellow."

"No; they would say I was an adventurer, a fortune-hunter, who had taken a mean advantage and entrapped Vera into a *mésalliance*."

"A *mésalliance!* The *mésalliance* would be the other way. The Balmaines are an old county family, and poor Vera is literally a girl without a grandfather."

"But a ruined family; and money nowadays counts for more than blood. Besides, the very fact of my belonging to an honourable family is another reason why I should not be guilty of a dishonourable action."

"A dishonourable action! Do you know, Alfred, you are talking great nonsense? How can it possibly be dishonourable to marry any good girl whom you love? What difference can it make in the point of honour whether she has two hundred or two million pounds?"

"A great deal. All the same; it is a matter rather of sentiment than reason. Others may not feel as I feel; *chacun à son goût*, you know."

"Well, I won't reason with you then. Only if you are resolved not to marry Vera, you and she must cease to meet. I cannot let you make a sport of the poor child's affections."

"I make a sport of her affections! What do you mean, Cora?" exclaimed Alfred aghast.

"What I say. Neither more nor less. You do all in your power to make her love you, and yet you say you won't marry her."

"But she does not love me."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Well, I see none of the signs that are supposed to bespeak love. Nothing could be more frank and friendly than her manner. To me it seems altogether too friendly for love. There is none of that shyness and constraint, that tender embarrassment and sweet confusion, which young girls who love always show."

"You speak as if you had been reading the subject up in a sentimental novel; but you forget that Vera has not been brought up as other girls; she has not the same ideas, and neither shows nor conceals her feelings in the same way. I certainly think you are not indifferent to her, and, in my opinion, you are letting an overstrained sense of delicacy stand between you and your mutual happiness. But frankly, I am more concerned for her happiness than for yours. You are a man and can take care of yourself, but she is a young girl, placed in a most invidious and exceptional position. Has it never occurred to you how great is the risk of her becoming the victim of some needy and unscrupulous fortune-hunter? You, at least, are not a fortune-hunter, let the world say what it may. Your scruples are highly honourable, Alfred—that I freely admit—but in this instance you are mistaken. You will be doing wrong, very wrong, both to yourself and her, if you do not marry——"

"Miss Hardy," said the maid, throwing open the door, and Vera, stepping into the room, embraced

her friend, and gave Alfred the friendly and unembarrassed greeting which he had hitherto looked upon as one of the indications that she did not return his love. On the other hand, she was less bright than her wont, had little to say, and as Cora did not seem to be in her usual high spirits, and Alfred, absorbed by the thoughts which her remarks had suggested, conversed with effort, and often at random, the re-union was less successful than usual.

On the plea that she had a headache, Vera left early, and shortly afterwards Alfred, who had several hours' writing to do before going to bed, took leave of Cora and Mrs. Maitland and returned to his lodgings. There he found two letters awaiting him, both of which, as the sequel proved, were fraught with important consequences, as well for himself as for others.

One came from Mr. Wilkins, whom by this time he had almost forgotten. It was of the very briefest, containing merely an invitation to dinner and an expression of regret that, owing to his having been detained longer in America than he expected, he had not been able sooner to carry out his promise.

The other letter was from Warton, and brought strange news. "Something devilish unpleasant," in connection with the Hardy Trust, had turned up, wrote the managing clerk in his own picturesque style. The company had reopened the campaign,

and this time they seemed to have hit on a real flaw, which, though it might not make Saintly Sam's fortune, was like enough, according to present appearances, to deprive Miss Hardy of hers. Could Balmaine call at the office on an early day? Mr. Artful would much like to see him.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PLOT.

THERE used to be a house of entertainment at Paris, known as the Hôtel des Miracles, Rue des Apôtres, names which, since the advent of the Third Republic, have been changed for others less suggestive of effete superstition, and more in harmony with the ideas of an age and a country which does not believe in anything particular.

The Rue des Apôtres, was a narrow street on the left bank of the Seine, a street of tall houses and small shops ; the Hôtel des Miracles, a narrow building of five stories, flanked on one side by a wine shop, on the other by an ancient *porte cochère* and a *debit de tabac.* Behind the double front door was a recess, wherein slept—with a cord round his arm, so arranged that nobody could enter without rousing him—Auguste, the single porter and general factotum of the establishment; for Madame Merveille could not afford—or thought she could not afford—two porters, and she did not choose to supply the whole of her twenty or thirty lodgers, some of whom she hardly knew by sight, with latch keys.

On one side of the entrance passage was a dining-room, capable of accommodating comfortably a score or more of diners ; on the other, Madame Merveille's cabinet, in which she received her visitors and kept her books. Behind was the kitchen. All the rest of the house consisted of bedrooms, the Miracles being both an ordinary inn and an hotel *meublé*. Most of Madame Merveille's guests were, indeed, lodgers only. Some of them she seldom saw, except when they paid their bills—nor always then, for as often as not they left the money with Auguste, either before Madame got up or after she went to bed. But she had also regular *pensionnaires*, whom, being a good soul and a sensible woman, she treated well and charged moderately. Boarders, who proposed to make a long stay, she would rate as low as thirty or forty francs a week, giving them a good bedroom on the fourth story, three meals a day, and wine at discretion. Madame Merveille's liberality in the matter of wine did not lose her anything, however, for the more her lodgers drank of it the less they were likely to eat. She knew that a litre of *vin ordinaire* at fifty centimes, taken with a meal, provokes appetite as little as it promotes digestion.

It is hardly necessary to say that the Hôtel des Miracles was frequented almost exclusively by Madame Merveille's compatriots, the vast majority of foreign visitors being as ignorant of the existence of the Rue des Apôtres as was the worthy landlady

of the English tongue. Nevertheless, a few weeks before Alfred Balmaine received the startling communication from Warton, mentioned in the foregoing chapter, three Englishmen, not unknown to the reader, were under Madame Merveille's roof.

One was Vernon Corfe; the other two were Saintly Sam and Lawyer Ferret. They were sitting at one end of the table in the little *salle à manger*, which had evidently just been the scene of a repast, and as the regular diners, according to their wont, had adjourned to a neighbouring café and elsewhere, the three men had the room to themselves.

"This seems a nice little house," Saintly Sam was saying.

"And not half a bad dinner either," observes the lawyer, sipping his coffee and proceeding to light a cigar.

"I should think so," puts in Corfe, "you would have had to pay five francs for such a dinner on the boulevards, wine not included. But it was not merely for the sake of economy that I asked you to come here. It is so much quieter than the big hotels on the other side of the Seine, and more out of the way, you know."

"And more Frenchy," remarks the chairman of the Hardy Fortune Company gravely. "When I am in France I like to be Frenchy. But what are we here for? That's what I want to know. You invited us to meet you on important business con-

nected with our claim to the Hardy fortune. You said you had important disclosures to make, which would insure us getting the fortune. We lunched at the station at two o'clock; we drove straight here, and found you waiting for us. You said as dinner was just ready we had better not go into business till after. Ferret and me were quite willing, being uncommonly hungry. But now as we have satisfied our appetites and all's quiet, let us go into things without any further loss of time. Is not that quite right, Ferret ?"

"Quite right, Mr. Hardy. And Mr. Corfe must not forget that our time is precious."

"Yours is, Ferret, to judge by your bills," returns Sam, laughing slyly at his own joke. "This journey will cost a bonny penny, too. However, that is neither here nor there, if this gentleman will put us in the way of getting our rights."

"I both can and will—on conditions, Mr. Hardy."

"Conditions! That means brass, I suppose? Well, make your proposals, Mr. Corfe, and I'll give you my answer. But first of all, tell us what you have got to sell—for that's what it amounts to I reckon."

"I can easily do that," says Corfe quietly, handing Sam a cigar and lighting one himself. "Well, I think I may say I know as much of the ins and outs of this business as you know yourselves. As

for the facts, they are notorious, while as for the law I have taken advice from a very clever English barrister, a friend of mine who lives in Paris, because, like some other people, he finds it a more convenient place of residence than London. Now it results from what he says and I know, that as affairs look at present, you have not a ghost of a chance——"

"Come, come; I am not at all sure about that," interrupts Ferret.

"But I am, and you know I am right, Mr. Ferret," answers Corfe firmly. "I repeat it, you have not a ghost of a chance. What does it matter where old John Hardy came from, or whether he was Mr. Hardy's grandfather or great uncle, or whatever else you may call him? Vera Leonino—Miss Hardy, I mean—is the heiress. Even if there was no will, she would inherit, and there is a will, leaving her everything. And there can be no question about her being Philip Hardy's child. It can be proved in half-a-dozen ways."

"If that's your opinion, what did you mean by that letter you wrote us, and what are we here for?" asks Saintly Sam angrily.

"Wait a minute. Suppose Vera's father and mother were not married, or, what comes to the same thing, she cannot prove they were, how then?"

"Then I do believe we should get the fortune,"

says Ferret. "It is my firm conviction we should. At any rate, she could not get it; I'd take deuced good care of that."

"But they were married, and I can prove it."

Here Corfe pauses for a reply, and the other two gaze at him in blank amazement.

"What the devil do you mean?" demands Ferret.

"Where is the flaw?" exclaims Hardy.

"I said I could prove it. But nobody else can; and if it's made worth my while—do you twig now?" asks Corfe, leaning back in his chair and leering wickedly at Ferret through the smoke of his cigar.

"I think I do. But I don't understand how you can have exclusive possession of the proofs."

"I will enlighten you. Philip Hardy was married at a town called Balafria, in Lombardy. It was more than half burnt down during the war of 1859, and the church, public offices, records of births, deaths, and marriages were utterly destroyed. But Philip Hardy had taken the precaution to obtain properly attested and legalised copies of the documents necessary to prove his marriage. Those copies were in his possession when he died; they are in my possession now."

"How did you come by them?"

"That is my business. But I will say this much, that it was quite by accident."

"You mean you did not steal them," says the lawyer bluntly.

"No, I did not steal them; though I do not see what it would matter to you even if I did."

"But how are we to know, first of all, that these papers are genuine, and, secondly, that duplicates—certified copies—are not to be obtained at the place you mentioned just now—Balafria?"

"Firstly, by going with me to the Italian consul, who will tell you they are genuine; secondly, by trying to get certified copies, when you will be told that none are to be had. If you like I will go with you to Italy, and you can make personal inquiry on the spot."

"That seems right enough, as far as it goes. And now we come to the most important question of all. How much do you want?"

"Ten thousand pounds."

"Ten thousand devils!" exclaims Saintly Sam, startled by Corfe's modest demand into unwonted coarseness of language. "I'll see you—— Come, Ferret, let us go. He's mad."

"If he be in earnest he is; but maybe he is not. Do you really mean, Mr. Corfe, that you expect us to give you ten thousand pounds for these certificates?"

"Certainly, and they are cheap at the money. The other side would give me ten times as much."

"Why don't you treat with the other side, then?"

"Because I don't want Miss Hardy to get the fortune. She would marry that scoundrel Balmaine, and I hate them both. However, that is nothing to you. Will you give ten thousand for two millions or not?"

"Yes, and as much more as you say the other side will give, if you will insure us getting the two millions."

"Why, you said just now that if Vera could not prove she was born in wedlock you were absolutely sure of getting it."

"I said it was my firm opinion we should. It is my opinion still. But I am not infallible. The Court of Chancery might not take the same view of the case. There is always the glorious uncertainty, you know. And assuming that all you say is true, how can we tell that there does not exist somewhere a second attested copy of the marriage register? Suppose, for instance, that Philip Hardy had it in duplicate, and the duplicate should be found among his father's papers, or in possession of some of his wife's kinsfolk—how then?"

"That is impossible."

"Not a bit of it. Missing documents are apt to turn up unexpectedly sometimes. Anyhow, the contingency is to be taken into consideration, and though the papers you have got hold of may have

a certain value, they are not worth anything like the value you put on them."

"How much will you give then?" asks Corfe, lowering his tone. He found that this rough Lancashire lawyer was not quite so easily to be imposed upon as he had thought.

"What do you say, Mr. Hardy?" says Ferret, turning to his client. "Would you give a thousand —supposing, of course, all as this gentleman says can be proved?"

"No; I would not. In my opinion five hundred would be twice too much. But we will say five hundred; and one way and another the risk is so heavy that I don't much care whether Mr Corfe takes it or not."

"Five hundred—only five hundred pounds!" exclaims Corfe, now in his turn moved to indignation. "I'll see you both hanged first."

"Thank you. I think we are quite as likely to see you hanged first, Mr. Corfe. You refuse our offer then? In that case we may as well go back to-morrow, Mr. Hardy."

Corfe reflected. It is mortifying to get only five hundred pounds when you have been expecting ten thousand, and counting confidently on five. But five hundred is a nice sum, and Corfe was in need of money. As for the other side, his story about revenge was only half true. Revenge may be sweet, but hard cash is sometimes sweeter; and Corfe had

written to Artful and Higginbottom, offering to sell them "some very important information relating to the Hardy Trust;" but as Artful knew him to be a scoundrel, and would not have believed him on his oath, he left the letter unanswered. For this rebuff Corfe owed the lawyer a grudge, and the desire "to be even with him" and "put a spoke in Balmaine's wheel" at the same time, was, probably, not without its influence in deciding him to accept Sam Hardy's offer. In any case he did accept it—after a short wrangle and a vain attempt to get more.

"I know I am a fool for making such a bargain," he said, "and if it was not that I want so much to serve those beggars out I would not take a centime less than ten thousand."

"We have nothing to do with your motives, Mr. Corfe," answered Ferret curtly, "but the more I think about it the more I feel sure that five hundred is more than enough. How can we tell as these documents are not forgeries, after all? Such things have happened."

"Do you think I am such a scoundrel?" began Corfe furiously. "Let me tell you——"

"Come, come, there is nothing to get into a passion about," interrupted the lawyer. "I did not say it was so; I merely suggested the possibility of such a thing. I think we may look upon this business as being settled, Mr. Hardy—subject, of

course, to the proofs promised by Mr. Corfe proving satisfactory."

"That's the main point, I reckon. Let us make as sure as we can, whatever else we do. It's a good lump is five hundred pounds."

"Yes; we shall have to make a trip to Italy, and the sooner we start, I think, the better."

This idea was at once acted upon. They started the very next afternoon, and ten days later Corfe received a draft on London for the sum in question—after giving up Philip Hardy's marriage certificate, which Mr. Ferret very carefuliy burnt.

CHAPTER XIV.

A HAPPY THOUGHT.

When Balmaine called on Mr. Artful, as he did the very next day after receiving Warton's letter, the nature of the flaw in Miss Hardy's case, discovered by the Hardy Fortune Company, and of which they seemed determined to take every advantage, was fully explained to him. "There could be no question," he said, "that Philip Hardy and Vera's mother were really married, and that Vera was born in wedlock. This, Philip's letters to his father, announcing his marriage and the birth of his daughter, together with the evidence of Martino and Gabrielle Courbet abundantly proved—from a moral point of view; and if there were no opposition to Vera's claim, the Court of Chancery and the trustees would doubtless consider these proofs as sufficient. But in the event of her legitimacy being disputed—if it were asserted by parties claiming to be John Hardy's legal representatives that she was born out of wedlock, then it would be necessary to prove the marriage strictly, either by producing a properly certified copy of the marriage register, or witnesses who could testify

that the union had been solemnized in accordance with the laws of the country where it took place.

In anticipation of this difficulty Mr. Artful had some time before requested the British Consul at Milan to procure and forward him this essential document, but he was informed in reply that all the public records of Balafria (where Mr. and Mrs. Hardy were married), having been destroyed during the war of 1859, his request could not be complied with. This was unfortunate, but as the Hardy Fortune Company seemed to have given up the contest, and no other claimants were forthcoming, he had assumed that they (the trustees) would have a walk over and given himself no further concern in the matter. Now, however, that their opponents had thrown down the glove—in other words filed a bill—and openly challenged Vera's legitimacy, it had become necessary to act with vigour and despatch.

"I suppose they have found out that no certificate is producible," said the lawyer; "how, I cannot conceive. In any case, it is a dirty trick and quite like that rascal Ferret. But these Calder people can take nothing by their motion, for even if they should succeed in depriving Miss Vera of her fortune, they will not get it. I can promise them that. And they are, perhaps, counting without their host, after all. There were witnesses of the marriage, of course. We must try to find them."

"And that would do as well? '

"Quite as well."

"Don't you think Ferret knows all this?"

"Of course he does. But he wants to run up a big bill of costs, and so advises his clients to fight, even though he knows that, whatever may be the issue, they have not the ghost of a chance. But the great point now, so far as we are concerned, is to hunt up the witnesses of the marriage. Will you undertake the task?"

"Go to Italy, you mean?"

"Yes; you are just the man. You know the case, you know the ground, and you know what we want. Will you do it? You may name your own terms."

"Very well; I will go and do my best," said Alfred, after a moment's thought. "When would you like me to start?"

This time Balmaine did not refuse payment. The world's buffets were beginning to wear off the edge of his Quixotism, and he really could not afford to throw away several weeks' time, even in Vera's service, or rather in the service of the Hardy fortune, which, as likely as not, would never be hers.

"When would I like you to start," repeated the lawyer. "Well, I don't know that there is any particular hurry. Say in a week's time. Will that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"In that case we may consider the matter as settled. Look in between this and next Monday and I will give you your instructions, and what is quite as necessary, a supply of cash. These people have fired the first shot—filed their bill—but we need not put in an answer just yet. When we do, it will be to pray the court to administer the trusts of the will."

"But that will be a surrender, won't it?"

"Oh dear, no. The court will review the facts and decide the case on its merits. The Calder Company will produce their proofs—if they have any—and their supposed claim will doubtless be urged by competent counsel. We shall, of course, represent Miss Hardy, and I have no doubt that, whatever may be the issue, the Vice-Chancellor will allow the costs out of the estate."

Balmaine did not say, albeit he thought, that Ferret was, perhaps, not the only solicitor in the world who liked to make a big bill of costs. Neither did he hint to Mr. Artful that the prospect of Vera losing her fortune was far from displeasing to him. In point of fact, he left the office in Lincoln's Inn Fields in a happier frame of mind than he had known for many a day. It was probably this serenity of spirit that suggested a happy thought—and happy thoughts are often more fruitful in results than hard work. As he turned into Fleet Street it occurred to him that it might not be amiss to call on the

manager of the *Day*, tell him that he was bound for North Italy, and ask if he could do anything for the paper there. He by no means anticipated a favourable answer, but there was just the off-chance that it might be favourable; if it were not, he would be no worse off than before.

Mr. Nonpareil received him somewhat less cordially than on the occasion of his first visit. The manager was evidently both very much occupied and preoccupied. Balmaine seeing this, explained his business in the fewest possible words.

"Going to North Italy, are you?" said the manager. "Well, we have no correspondent there, and if anything should occur—anything very particular, you know—you might send us an account of it. But you had better see the editor. He may, perhaps, suggest something. You know him, of course?"

"Only by name."

"Indeed? Well, I will send in your name and tell him you will call this evening—shall we say nine o'clock? Good. The porter below will tell you how to proceed."

"On this Balmaine made haste to take his leave, and when he got below addressed himself to the porter for an explanation of the manager's rather enigmatic instructions. Obtaining access to the editor of the *Day* seemed to be an undertaking of some difficulty. He was first of all to knock at a

certain door in the court, pointed out by the porter, and ask if Mr. Manifold was in the office. Should the answer be in the affirmative, Balmaine must cross to a door on the opposite side of the court, press a button, the position of which the porter minutely described to him, and when the attendant came hand in his card. He would then, if Mr. Manifold was able to see him, be favoured with an interview.

All this Alfred did. He knocked at one door, and after ascertaining that the manager was in, pressed the button of the other, whereupon it was slowly and cautiously opened and he was let inside.

"You want to see the editor?" said the attendant, and without waiting for a reply, led the way up a broad flight of stone steps, then along a corridor to a door, which, throwing open, he told Alfred to be pleased to take a seat until the editor came, and incontinently withdrew. It was a large, well-furnished room, with sofas, easy chairs, a long table, and a handsome bookcase—not in the least like the "den" of the traditional editor.

Alfred sat down in the twilight, feeling almost as if he were engaged in some conspiracy, and wondering what like was the man who forged the thunderbolts of the *Day* and wielded the power of a minister of state, how he would be received, and thinking what he should say. He had ample time for reflection. Mr. Manifold did not put in an appearance for a full half-hour, and when he did come the door opened so

quietly, and he entered so softly, that before Balmaine became aware of the editor's presence he was half-way across the room.

"How do you do, Mr. Balmaine?"

The great editor spoke as softly as he walked—a man of middle age and middle height, with a high forehead, a pale, intellectual, weary face, bent shoulders, and "a frosty pow." He looked to Alfred like an overburdened Atlas, a mentally strong man, perhaps, yet whose physical strength was not equal to his day.

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Balmaine," he said. "Your letters from Geneva were very good. I am sorry for our sake that you have left. What can I do for you?"

Alfred told him of his proposed journey to Italy.

"Well, if you can find any good subjects, and send us a few letters, I will do my best to use them. Italy is always interesting, and I think the time is not far off when she will complete her unity by the redemption of Rome. France and Prussia are ready to fly at each other's throats, and when they do, the Temporal Power must come to an end."

"You think there will be war then?"

"I look upon a war between France and Prussia as inevitable. France cannot lose her supremacy in Europe without a struggle. The unification of Germany would be fatal to her supremacy, and

Napoleon will try at all hazards to hinder its consummation. Yes, sooner or later, and rather sooner than later, we shall have a European war."

As he spoke the editor rose from his chair, and Balmaine taking this as a hint that the interview was at an end, "made his adieux."

He went away in good spirits. Something might come of the interview after all, for it would be strange, indeed, if he could not find matter for a few letters in North Italy, letters which might possibly lead to a permanent connection with the paper. Balmaine having a sanguine temperament could not help being hopeful, any more than he could help being unduly depressed under disappointment, for one extreme begets another. Circumstances in the present instance did not, perhaps, justify great expectations; but when, two or three days later, he dined with Mr. Wilkins, that gentleman made him a proposal which offered tangible grounds for encouragement. It was to take the editorship of a monthly commercial and financial magazine, "to be run," as Mr. Wilkins put it, in connection with a similar undertaking in the United States.

"But I know so little about commerce and finance," said Balmaine.

"You will soon learn," was the answer. "I can get you facts and information. You will only have to put them into shape. It will not take very much of your time."

The salary was to be two hundred a year, and, as the enterprise could not be launched for two or three months, there would be ample time before its inception for the contemplated journey to Italy. Alfred, of course, accepted the offer with both hands, and went away as much rejoiced as if he had come into a fortune as big as Vera's, or that which ought to be Vera's. With two hundred a year and his other earnings he would be almost as well off as if he had retained the editorship of the *Helvetic News*. Cora, whom he saw on the following day, though she congratulated him, did not seem so much surprised at his rise in life as he had expected.

"Of course you will get on," she said, "better, I dare say, than if you had stayed at Geneva. But what a terrible thing this is about poor Vera and her fortune! I declare I am quite ashamed of Calder. Saintly Sam is a wretch, and Ferret a villain. They cannot get the fortune themselves and they are trying to take it from Vera! But I do hope they won't succeed! You must find these witnesses, Alfred."

"What does Vera say about it?"

"Not very much. She will be here soon and you can ask her yourself."

Cora, as Alfred had already discovered, was not in the most serene of tempers. Truth to say, she was greatly perplexed by the turn things were taking.

For months she had been trying to make Vera and her cousin fall in love with each other, and now when the goal was in view and she had almost persuaded Alfred to propose, came this stroke of the Fortune Company; and though she hoped for the best, she could not conceal from herself that her friend was in imminent danger of being reduced to penury. Cora, though not mercenary, was essentially practical, and being blessed with a more than average share of common-sense, it seemed to her that in the changed condition of things it would be nothing less than a misfortune for Alfred and Vera to become engaged. How could her cousin, with the two hundred a year, of which he was so proud, and a few pounds more, precariously earned, keep a wife?

Yet with the proverbial perversity of lovers, they would probably regard the present as being an especially propitious time for an exchange of vows and the swearing of everlasting constancy. But what could she do, without laying herself open to the imputation of being actuated by unworthy motives, to avert this consummation? And was not she herself, a poor girl, engaged to a poor man? Taking all this into consideration, Cora came to the sensible conclusion to let matters take their course.

"I have meddled and muddled," she thought, "and, perhaps, if I meddle any more I shall only

make the muddle worse. I'll leave it to Providence. People who do not possess the gift of foresight have no business to weave elaborate schemes for the benefit of their friends. They may not prove beneficial after all."

CHAPTER XV.

BALMAINE PROPOSES.

THE cousins were still discussing the iniquities of Saintly Sam and his familiar spirit, as Ferret was called at Calder, and the chances of the chancery suit, when Miss Hardy was announced. She did not appear to be much concerned, while, as for Alfred, his spirits seemed higher than ever. A bad sign, thought Cora. She knew her cousin's impulsive nature, especially in affairs of the heart; and remembering how easily declarations were made she feared the worst. As ill-luck would have it, too, Vera had hardly come in when Miss Balmaine was called out. No invented excuse this time, but a call of real necessity. The cook had scalded her foot and fainted. There was a terrible hurry-skurry in the kitchen, and in the absence of Mrs. Maitland Cora was compelled to descend to the basement and take the part of mistress.

"Are you very much concerned at the turn things have taken, Miss Hardy?" asked Balmaine rather vaguely when they were alone.

"About the poor cook, you mean? Yes, I am very sorry. I fear her foot is badly scalded."

"No, I don't mean about the poor cook. I mean about the Fortune Company, and the possibility that——"

"The fortune will never be mine," said Vera, finishing the sentence. "Yes, for some reasons I am very sorry. I shall have to abandon plans on which I had rather set my heart; and I must give up Reindeer—poor Reindeer! What will become of him, I wonder?" sighing.

"Happy Reindeer," thought Alfred.

"But I am far more glad than sorry, Mr. Balmaine," she added with brightening eyes, and a look that confirmed her words.

"Glad to lose a fortune of two millions! How many there are who would give their very souls for a few years' enjoyment of such wealth."

"They are very poor creatures then. They can never have known what it is to be rich."

"That is very probable, I think. They would like to know, though. And if the wealthy did not find that their wealth gives them more pleasure than pain they would not cling to it so tenaciously."

"They have perhaps never known what it is to be poor," said Vera mock seriously.

"Perhaps not," returned Alfred with a smile. "All the same, it is not pleasant to be poor, or to feel that you are in danger of being poor. But, do you know, I think people are none the worse for feeling, once in their lives, the pinch of poverty.

The experience enables them to sympathise all the more with those who are less well off than themselves. It makes them more generous too; for, if you notice, our greatest public benefactors are generally men who have risen, and who some time or other have known what it is to be poor. If you hear of anybody giving or bequeathing a large sum of money for the promotion of learning or the relief of poverty it is almost sure to be a self-made man, hardly ever a great noble or wealthy squire. The millionaire pill-maker who died the other day is said to have given and left more than half a million for charitable purposes; but the banker-peer who died at the same time, and was worth six millions, did not leave a pound of it for any higher object than the aggrandisement of his family."

"I don't much admire pill-makers," said Vera, "but I honour that man far more than the peer. The peer was an egotistical wretch!"

"I would not say that. He was selfish certainly, but he acted according to his lights. He had never gone through a course of poverty. I don't mean penury. And you, Miss Hardy, if you had been all your life cradled in luxury, and brought up as a great heiress, would not have looked upon your fortune as a responsibility too heavy to be borne."

"Thank Heaven, I was not. I would rather be a Vaudois milkmaid than a great heiress."

"There, I think, you are wrong. For a great heiress may, if she likes, become a milkmaid, but a milkmaid cannot very well become a great heiress. The one has a choice of destinies which the other does not possess. Neither am I sure that the lot even of a Swiss milkmaid is altogether to be desired. In summer time and fine weather it is all very well —poetic, romantic, and healthy—but in winter, I should think, the calling has its drawbacks. And, I fancy, milkmaids have not much opportunity for the cultivation of literature and art, and you love literature and art, Miss Hardy."

"How practical you are, Mr. Balmaine. But you misunderstand me. I meant that I would be rather brought up as a Vaudois milkmaid than as great heiresses are generally brought up. You speak of literature and art. Well, I have met at the Leytons some girls who are said to be very rich, and I am sure they have fewer ideas than any milkmaid in our commune."

"And what arrangement could be more admirable?" returned Alfred with assumed gravity. "Dame Fortune is much less capricious with her gifts than we sometimes give her credit for being. She gives Swiss milkmaids ideas and idealess English girls money. It is only rarely, as in your case, that she bestows on the same fortunate maiden both money and ideas."

"You are in a merry humour, I think, Mr. Bal-

maine. Fortune is capricious whatever you may say. And I'm not the exception you would make me. You are pleased to say I have ideas, but I have not the money—that is as good as gone."

"Not yet; and it may not go. You are still the heiress presumptive, and if I can find the priest who married your father and mother, or one of the witnesses to the marriage, as I hope to do, you will be the heiress in fact."

"You hope to find them—really now?" and she looked straight up to him as if she would read his thoughts. She was sitting on a low chair knitting, an accomplishment in which, like most Swiss-bred young women, she excelled; he on a higher one not far from her.

What did she mean? Had she guessed? Could Cora have told her?

"I shall do my best to find them as in duty bound. But——"

She looked down again, and went on with her knitting. Alfred's heart beat wildly, and for a minute or two neither spoke a word.

Vera was the first to break silence, but only by a single word—"Yes?" the "Yes" interrogative not affirmative. It was an invitation to Balmaine to complete his sentence.

"I should be glad not to find them if I thought—if I thought—if I thought" (impetuously) "that you love me as I love you, Vera."

He did not intend to speak thus; the avowal being uttered, as it seemed to him, without any volition of his own.

"And whom should I love if I love not you? she returned in a low yet collected voice. "Have you not always been good to me, rendering me many services and placing me under great obligation? and have you not always shown yourself chivalrous and high-minded? In that so like M. Senarclens, though in many things so different, caring more for high principles than material advantage."

"And, then, you do love me, dear, dear Vera?" exclaimed Alfred in an exultant voice, taking her unresisting hand in his.

"Have I not said so? Yes, I love you, Alfred Balmaine, and you are mine and I am yours until death do us part—*n'est ce pas?*"

"It is so. But——"

"But?"

"I mean that though I love you more than I can tell, the avowal was made on the impulse of the moment. I had made up my mind to keep my love to myself, lest people should say that it was mercenary love, and that I cared more for your fortune than yourself."

"What, Alfred Balmaine!" she exclaimed, rising from her chair with an indignant gesture, "do you know me so little as to suppose that I heed what people say, or that I would not, if you asked me,

give this fortune away—scatter it to the four winds of heaven?"

"I did not know that you loved me then, dearest," said Alfred, putting his arms round her, and sealing their betrothal on her lips.

"But you know now," she answered smiling, as she pushed back the curls from his forehead and looked lovingly into his eyes. "And were you not just a little selfish in hiding your love because you feared to share my lot?"

"Feared?"

"Yes, you were afraid of what people would say. I have a strong persuasion that the fortune will never be mine; but if it should, you will help me to bear the burden, will you not? With your help I do not think I should feel it to be a burden. You will not mind what people may say, now?" A strong emphasis on the "now!"

"Now that I know you love me," returned Alfred passionately, "let them say what they like. And perhaps, after all, I was wrong in resolving not to speak to you of my love, but I thought it my duty. I could not bear the idea of being considered a fortune-hunter—perhaps by you, certainly by others."

"It is as Cora says; you are too sensitive on the point of honour—too Quixotic; or is it pride?"

"Perhaps. And Cora—did she ever hint? You know what I mean—she guessed my secret?"

"Your cousin has always been good and kind," answered Vera evasively, "and very anxious to promote your happiness and mine; but don't tell her of this, nor anybody else."

"Not tell Cora!"

"Not just now. Leave that to me. And as you are going to Italy so soon, and may be away for some time, it would be well, I think, to keep our betrothal a secret for the present."

"Your will is my law, Vera. And there is another reason for keeping it to ourselves. You may be made a ward in Chancery, and it might not please the Lord Chancellor to sanction our engagement."

"But when I am *majeure!*"

"Then you will be your own mistress. How do the Leytons take the change in your prospects? Are they as kind as they were? And you——"

"There is somebody coming!" interrupted Vera, withdrawing from his side and sinking into her settee.

The next moment the door opened and Cora appeared on the scene.

"It is not so bad as I thought," she said, "Jane was more frightened than hurt. Fancy a big stout girl like her fainting because some not very hot water fell on her foot! And what have you been talking about all this time?"

"I was just asking Miss Hardy how the Leytons take the change in her prospects," replied Balmaine

carelessly; "if they are as kind as they were when she was regarded as an undoubted heiress."

"The very question I was going to ask her myself. It must make a difference. If the Leytons are not kind to you, dear—if you are not comfortable—you must come here. Make your home with us, Nothing would give Mrs. Maitland and me more pleasure."

"A thousand thanks, Cora dear. You are really too kind; and I need hardly say that I would rather be your lodger than the Leytons' guest. But I do not feel that I ought to leave them just now, even if I could—as to which, being a minor, I am not quite sure. Whatever may be their motive, Sir James and Lady Leyton have been very kind to me, and are so still. When Sir James told me of what he called the weak point in my armour, which the Fortune Company have discovered, I said at once that I must set about earning my own living. But he would not hear of it—seemed almost angry indeed—and said that until the court decides otherwise I am the heiress and his ward and must remain his guest. I have, therefore, no alternative. But once the case is decided against me, and I think it will be, I shall certainly come away. I could not bear to be dependent on the Leytons—nor on anybody else."

"You are quite right. You have no need to be dependent on them," said Cora warmly. "Have you any idea how soon you will know your fate?"

"No; but I hope soon. I have asked Sir James that no unnecessary delays may be interposed, and he has promised that he will use his influence in that sense with Mr. Artful."

And so the talk went on, but not for very long. The carriage came earlier than usual. There was to be feasting that evening in Grosvenor Square, and Lady Leyton had asked Vera to be back in good time. So she went out of the room with Cora "to put her things on." When the two returned, a few minutes later, Balmaine saw at a glance that his cousin knew all.

"Well, you are a nice pair," she said, in spite of her doubts pleased, though dubious withal as to the prudence of an engagement in present circumstances. "You choose the very moment when one is suffering from a reverse of fortune and the other is perhaps on the point of losing her inheritance, to become engaged! All the same, I am very glad, and wish you every happiness. But how do you propose to keep a wife, Alfred?"

"I think I can," was the confident reply. "I am not doing badly, and you said only just now that you thought I should do well."

"Always sanguine," put in Cora with a smile."

"You forget me, I think, Miss Balmaine," exclaimed Vera proudly, and with more than pretended warmth. "Whatever happens, I shall not be dependent on Alfred. Do you forget what that nice

gentleman—Mr. Roberts isn't his name—at Peter, Piper, and Pepper's said when you introduced me to him as Miss Leonini? He said I could easily earn five or six guineas a week with my sketches. There now!"

"And if the worst comes to the worst," added Alfred gaily, "we can do as you and George are doing—wait and hope."

CHAPTER XVI.

FAILURE AND SUCCESS.

THE Leytons were not, as may be supposed, altogether disinterested in refusing to let Vera go. Their motives were rather mixed. They felt instinctively that it would look mean, and expose them to unpleasant remark, if they turned their backs on the girl the moment her prospects worsened—after they had made so much of her too. Then, again, Lady Leyton, in her selfish, indolent way, liked Vera—her presence made the house brighter, and it was pleasant to have her to talk with and read aloud, take her on shopping excursions, and consult on the all-important question of dress, for Lady Leyton had discovered that her young guest was gifted with exceptionally good taste. It had even occurred to her ladyship that if Vera should lose her fortune it might be well to engage her as a permanent companion and secretary —at a good salary, of course, for the Leytons were not stingy people. The arrangement would both contribute to her own comfort and gain her credit with her friends generally and the world at large.

Sir James had also a personal reason for desiring

to keep Vera. He hated to breakfast alone, and if she went away that would be his fate for at least six mornings in the week.

Husband and wife of course talked the matter over.

"It is very well," said Sir James, after they had arrived unanimously at the conclusion that Vera should continue as their guest and be treated—for the present at least—as she had been. "It is very well that Sydney has not made any advances—and I rather pressed him to do."

"I look upon it as quite providential," answered the lady. "Of course he won't think of such a thing now."

"Of course not. Trust Syd; he is too wideawake for that. I wish he would get done sowing his wild oats though."

"Marriage would steady him, don't you think?"

"Very likely. But wait a bit. Vera will perhaps get her fortune after all. It will be an infernal shame if she does not."

The worthy couple little thought that their son had proposed to Vera twice and been refused each time.

Sydney Leyton was far from being a man of noble nature; but even ignoble natures may have generous impulses. He felt his first repulse keenly, for though he did not love Vera passionately, he liked her well, and respected her even more than he liked

her; and he inferred from her manner when he made his first proposal that she rather despised him. So when he heard that she was likely to be bereft of her fortune he resolved to ask her a second time to be his wife, if only to show her that he was not the frivolous fortune-hunter she thought him. If she accepted him he would stand to his guns, whatever his father and mother might say, and if she did not he would have the satisfaction of knowing that he had behaved well and deserved Vera's good opinion.

She refused him, as he had rather feared—perhaps if he had analysed his motives rigidly he would have said hoped—but in a very different fashion from the first time—seriously, and with many expressions of sympathy and regret. She could not love him, she said—from no fault of his—and to marry a man whom she did not love would be a double wrong, a wrong to him and a wrong to her; but she should always take the warmest interest in his welfare, and hoped to see him one day a Member of Parliament and a great man.

It is probable that the refusal so graciously given pleased Sydney quite as much as an acceptance would have done. He expressed a hope that they should always remain firm friends, and assured Vera that he would do his very best to protect her interest and defeat the machinations of Saintly Sam.

It was partly out of consideration for Sydney that Vera wanted to keep secret her betrothal to

Balmaine. It might hurt his feelings, she thought, if he were to know that almost the day after she refused him she had accepted another.

Before Alfred left for Italy the lovers had one more stolen interview—short but sweet—contrived by Cora. It was agreed that during his absence, which he was to make as short as might be, they were to write to each other as often as possible.

"Write to me at Grosvenor Square," said Vera; "I have so many letters that one more or less will never be noticed, and nobody but myself so much as glances at the outside of them."

And so they parted, and Balmaine went on his way; but his second visit to Italy was no more successful than his first had been. He made first for Balafria, where Philip Hardy and Vera Leonino were married, and knowing from the former's letters to his father the date of the marriage, he had no difficulty in ascertaining who, at the time in question, was the parish priest. Everything depended on his finding this man, for if he had not himself solemnised the marriage, he would doubtless know who had. But Alfred failed to find him. After the war and the fire Father Ariosto—for so he was called—had gone to another part of the country—to Livorno, thought the syndic of Balafria, Alfred went to Livorno, and after a good deal of trouble found that the syndic was right. It appeared, however, that from Livorno Father Ariosto had gone somewhere

else, and Balmaine followed on his traces from place to place until he reached Genoa, where he learnt that the reverend gentleman had embarked on board a vessel bound for the Southern Seas, with the intention of proceeding thither as a missionary; but as the ship ran ashore on a cannibal island, and there was reason to believe that all the ship's company—except an able-bodied seaman, who alone escaped to to tell the tale—were either drowned or eaten—possibly both—it did not seem likely that the priest would be available as a witness in the suit of Hardy against Hardy, and to this effect Alfred advised Artful and Higginbottom. As for the other witnesses—and there were beyond doubt two—he failed to find out their names, and could not, therefore, very well find out them, nor did he, albeit he advertised extensively in divers Italian papers,

Yet notwithstanding Alfred's failure in the main object of his expectation, it had two important consequences. Wherever he went he was struck by the abject poverty of the masses of the Italian people, and he wrote some letters on the subject, which pleased the editor of the *Day* and rather startled his readers. They gave so much satisfaction, indeed, that he was requested to continue them, with which object he visited the south, and in an interesting series of articles he was able to show the close connection that obtained between the indigence of the people and brigandage and the Mafia and the

Camorra, and other secret societies of black-mailers, which the authorities, in spite of their utmost efforts, were unable to suppress.

When Mr. Manifold thought the British public had had enough of this sort of thing he instructed Balmaine (who for the previous six weeks had been acting exclusively for the *Day*) to return to London, informing him at the same time that the proprietors and the manager and himself were so pleased with his letters that they were prepared, on terms which he would learn on his arrival, to offer him a permanent place on the paper.

Nothing could well be more satisfactory, and the young fellow was naturally in high feather, as much by reason of the improvement in his prospects as the handsome manner in which his employers had recognised his services. Altogether he profited greatly by his Italian journey, and no less in experience than in pocket and reputation. But there is a drawback to everything, and he feared that his new duties would be incompatible with his retention of the editorship of Mr. Wilkin's financial journal. If he had to sacrifice one, however, it would certainly not be the *Day*.

CHAPTER XVII.

HAMMER AND TONGS.

During his absence in Italy Balmaine wrote to Vera regularly and often; owing to the uncertainty of his movements, however, she wrote less regularly to him; some of the letters she did write he never received, and when he reached London he had been without news from her for more than three weeks—in his love-heated imagination quite an age. Boiling over with impatience he rushed off to Bloomsbury Square—albeit the time was unconscionably early for a call, and he had not yet reported himself at the office of the *Day*. He feared that his letters had miscarried or been suppressed. He would ask Cora to see Vera that very afternoon, and arrange for a tryst later in the day.

"Is Miss Balmaine in?" he asked the not very intelligent maid who answered the bell, and, without waiting for a reply, went to the room in which his cousin was wont to do her literary work.

Cora was not there; but somebody else was.

"Vera!"

"Alfred!"

The next moment they were in each other's arms.

"You here?" he exclaimed. "What a delightful surprise!"

"What, did you not get the letter I sent to Naples? I am here altogether."

"Here altogether!"

"Yes; I have left the Leytons, and see" (pointing to some sketches that lay on the table), "I am earning my own living."

"But what has happened? Tell me all about it, for in an hour I should be at the office of the *Day*."

Vera told him all about it. As she said laughingly, he was the cause of all the trouble. By one of those accidents which so often mar the best laid schemes, their secret had been discovered. The greater part of her letters came by the first delivery, and were always lying on the table when she went down to breakfast. Those that came later were sent up to her room. But one morning several which came by the second delivery were placed by mistake in the breakfast-room, and when Sydney Leyton entered at his usually late hour he found them on the table, near his own. Lazily looking over the addresses, without any particular motive, he noticed that one of the letters bore the post-mark of Genoa.

"Who on earth can be writing to her from Genoa?" he soliloquised. "An English hand too. Some beggar, I suppose."

The next day he called at Artful and Higginbottom's office to ask about the progress of the suit, when the head of the firm showed him Balmaine's letter from Genoa announcing the failure of his quest.

"The same handwriting and the same place, by Jove!" he thought. "What can it mean? Are those two carrying on a correspondence, I wonder? I must find out."

By keeping a sharp look-out on the letters delivered by the postman, and occasionally overhauling the contents of the letter-box in the hall, he was not long in arriving at the conviction that Vera and Balmaine were carrying on a lively correspondence.

Now, albeit Vera's denial of his suit had not broken his heart, the thought that he had been rejected in favour of so obscure and impecunious a rival as Alfred Balmaine riled Sydney exceedingly. It seemed to him, moreover, that Vera was not acting sincerely, and he straightway informed his father of the discovery he had made and the suspicions it suggested.

Sir James was very angry, and when angry he was apt to be coarse and use rather strong language.

"Confound the fellow!" he exclaimed; "I will stop this, and pretty quickly. You did right to tell me, Sydney. I could not have believed that Vera was capable of such deceit—I might almost say of such base ingratitude."

When they met the next morning at breakfast, he opened the attack.

"You are corresponding with that Alfred Balmaine, Vera," said the knight abruptly. "What are your relations with the fellow?"

"Sir James!" explained the girl, for the moment quite confounded by the suddenness of the question.

"You do not seem to understand. I ask what are your relations with this Balmaine, to whom you write so often?"

"We are betrothed," said Vera quietly, recovering by an effort her self-possession.

"The devil you are! Well, I call it a piece of base ingratitude to go and get engaged without my knowledge and consent. It must be put a stop to."

"Pardon me, Sir James, that cannot be. I am sorry to displease you, but this is a matter about which you must allow me to please myself."

"Am I to understand, then, that you refuse to give this absurd engagement up?"

"Decidedly. Not for all the world would I give it up."

"In that case you cannot stay here," returned the knight furiously.

"As you like, Sir James," said Vera, rising from her chair and turning pale.

"Besides, don't you see that the fellow wants only your money? A beggarly journalist without a brass farthing to bless himself with! He is just

speculating on the chance of the suit going in your favour. I understand now the cause of those frequent visits to Bloomsbury Square. I little thought that Miss Balmaine was a mercenary matchmaker.

With a single indignant glance at Sir James, but without offering a word in reply, Vera left the room. Half an hour later she left the house.

"Did I do right?" she asked Alfred when she had told her story to the end.

"Quite right," he answered warmly. "You could not have done less, and it would have been a mistake to answer Sir James's insults. But are you as happy here as you were at Grosvenor Square, Vera?"

"Happier. I am free here; I can live my own life and I could not there. And, do you know, I find it a real pleasure to earn money. Look here" (showing a cheque for £10 10s.), "I received this only yesterday for some sketches."

"I congratulate you," laughed Alfred. "Why, if you go on at this rate you will become a millionaire by your own efforts. But where is Gabrielle?"

Gabrielle, said Vera, was staying with Lady Leyton, as her maid. Lady Leyton had called upon Vera the day after she left, and tried to persuade her to go back. But with this request—though Lady Leyton pressed it, and said her husband had been too hasty—she found it impossible to comply. After the scene with Sir James she could not bring

herself to accept his hospitality, and greatly preferred to be with Cora.

"If for no other reason, because we can see each other oftener, *mon cher ami*," she said with an affectionate glance at her lover. "You can come here, but you could not go to Grosvenor Square."

There had been a question of asking the Lord Chancellor to order her to return thither; but seeing that Sir James Leyton had told her in effect to go, that she would soon be of age, and that the suit was not likely to last very long, he thought it better not to persevere with the project. From Bloomsbury Square, whither he promised to return in the evening, Alfred went into the City and waited on Mr. Nonpariel. The manager received him with great cordiality, and after complimenting him warmly on his letters, said that if Balmaine liked to take a permanent post on the paper he could offer him six pounds a week, to begin with; but the staff being very full just then they could not find him very much to do; what that was he would learn from the editor. He would probably be asked from time to time to write articles on special subjects, review books, and so forth, and he must hold himself in readiness to proceed to any part of the world at very short notice. He could not, of course, contribute to any other daily paper; but for the rest he would be free to dispose of his own time in his own way.

Alfred accepted the offer and the conditions with

both hands, and left the office in great spirits, for, save in the event of his being dispatched on some distant expedition, he would be able both to fulfil his duties on the *Day* and conduct the *Financial Guide*—perhaps do other work as well. He was thus, as touching income, in quite as good a position as if he had remained at Geneva, and there were surely a wider field and better chances of advancement on the banks of the Thames than in the pleasant yet somewhat sleepy city of the lake.

From the *Day* office Balmaine went to Artful and Higginbottom and had a long talk with Mr. Artful and Warton. The Hardy estate, as he already knew, had been put into Chancery, that is to say, the executors were acting under the direction of the Court, and had, so to speak, become its agents. Miss Hardy's claim to the property was being hotly contested by the Fortune Company, interrogatories and answers put and given, affidavits filed, motions made by counsel, and altogether the suit was progressing very satisfactorily—for the lawyers.

"We are at it, hammer and tongs," said Warton.

"And what are the probabilities, Mr. Artful?" asked Balmaine.

The old lawyer lifted his eyebrows and took a pinch of snuff.

"Difficult to say; but in the absence of conclusive proofs of the marriage, I very much fear that Miss Vera will not get her fortune just yet; and I begin

to believe her grandfather was the Calder man after all."

"Saintly Sam will get it then," exclaimed Balmaine. "They say he has bought up so many shares in the Fortune Company that he and it are pretty much the same thing."

"He stands a very fair chance, I think. All the same, we mean to prevent him—if we can. And one of their witnesses—a fellow of the name of Murgatroyd—has so palpably perjured himself that it will cause the Court to look with suspicion on the other man's evidence. Mr. Murgatroyd has committed the fault of being too precise. He takes oath that he saw the late Mr. Hardy on a day which he cannot specify, but in a month and year about which he is quite sure, at his office in London. Now the late Mr. Hardy was a very exact man, and kept a business diary wherein all his movements are carefully recorded; and from his diary it appears that at the time in question he was on the Continent. So Murgatroyd's evidence amounts to nothing at all. If it were worth while we would prosecute him for perjury. But the other witness, Clutterbuck, is dangerous. From all accounts he is a respectable old fellow, and according to his affidavit was a close friend of the Calder John Hardy, when they were both young. When the latter went to London he went to Manchester, but in after life he met John Hardy more than once, and swears that he is our John

Hardy and no other. He even produces a letter from him, which appears to have contained a remittance; for Clutterbuck, being at the time in needy circumstances, had applied to his old companion for help. And that is not all. The gift is duly entered in the late Mr. Hardy's private cash book."

"Saintly Sam has a good case then?"

"It looks so, and unless we can persuade the Vice-Chancellor to accept as sufficient the indirect yet morally unimpeachable proofs of Philip Hardy's marriage which we are able to produce—have produced, in fact—we stand a very good chance of being beaten. But we are not beaten yet. The witnesses you could not find may possibly be forthcoming, and Warton is going down to Calder to look into the antecedents of the other John Hardy. Time is all in our favour, and if we can get the better of Saintly Sam and his crew I think Miss Vera may come into her fortune even yet."

Balmaine left the lawyer's office in much soberer mood than he had left the office of the *Day*, for though his love for Vera was pure and disinterested, and the loss of her fortune would cause him no distress, it was not pleasant to think that it might become the possession of "Saintly Sam and his crew," though probably little more than the jackal's share would be left for the crew. That was a lame and impotent conclusion indeed, and Vera and Cora,

when he talked the matter over with them in the evening, were greatly excited by the news he had brought.

"And they call this English law!" exclaimed Vera indignantly. "For the slur cast on my father and mother's memory I care nothing. They regarded each other as husband and wife, and that is enough for me. But if this Mr. Samuel Hardy inherits the fortune destined by my grandfather for my father and by my father for me, it will be an infamy, a travesty of justice. I would rather give it to that crossing sweeper in the street there, or scatter it broadcast to be scrambled for by beggars—anything rather than bestow it on this unprincipled scheming Calder cotton-spinner."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE JUDGMENT.

If Alfred and Vera had ever cherished any illusions as to the issue of the suit, they cherished them no longer. They looked upon the fortune as absolutely gone, and felt that, as touching their future, they must trust to themselves alone. And they had no cause for discouragement. As yet Balmaine's post on the *Day* was almost a sinecure. The editor now and again asked him to write an article or review a book, and he once acted for a fortnight as the foreign sub-editor's substitute, but the salary he received was rather a retainer than a remuneration for services actually rendered. He had ample time, as well for editing the *Guide* as for other work, and was gradually forming an outside connection which produced an acceptable addition to his income. One way and another he was earning from six to seven hundred a year; Vera half as much, and she was at work on a painting by which she expected to make something very nice indeed.

In these circumstances there was no reason why they should not marry so soon as they had saved enough to furnish, and as they spent little they

could look forward to an early consummation of their hopes.

Cora, practical as usual, counselled prudence, and advised the lovers not to be in too great a hurry. They could not tell what might happen ; their incomes were precarious, and it would be well for them, before beginning housekeeping, to have a few hundred pounds to the good, in addition to the amount required for furnishing.

But prudence and young love do not often go together. Alfred called his cousin a Job's comforter, and inquired whether, if George and she were equally well off, they would not make haste to marry ; a question which Cora thought it expedient to evade by saying something about the foolishness and impetuosity of men. As for Vera, judging by the Vaudois and not by the Grosvenor Square standard of comfort, she thought they would be rich beyond the dreams of avarice. For the rest, she left everything to *mon cher ami*, as she generally called Alfred, and he being thus constituted the arbiter of their destinies decided that they should be married so soon as they found a suitable house, and had the wherewithal for furniture.

The house was eventually found in the neighbourhood of Regent's Park, and tastefully and artistically, though not luxuriously furnished, for Balmaine was determined that his wife should have a pleasant and cheerful home.

They had hardly returned from their short wedding trip to the English lakes, when Alfred received a letter from Artful and Higginbottom, headed "Hardy *versus* Hardy," asking him to be good enough to make an early call at the office in Lincoln's Inn Fields; a request with which he promptly complied, for although Cora, Vera, and himself had wisely resolved to discuss the question as little as might be, and were rather weary of it, they could not help taking a warm interest in the case, and wondering often, both mentally and audibly, how it would end.

Mr. Artful thought that judgment would be given in the course of a month.

"In what sense?" asked Alfred.

"That I cannot say, though I have my opinion. But one point is settled—Saintly Sam won't get the fortune. We have knocked the wind out of his sails at any rate."

"I am very glad to hear it. How?"

"It was your friend Warton's doing. A sharp fellow, Warton. I sent him down to Calder to look up the antecedents of the John Hardy of that place, and pick a hole if he could in the evidence of that man, Clutterbuck. He went several times, and in the end hit on a notable discovery. The morality of your native town, some seventy or eighty years ago, does not seem to have been absolutely irreproachable, Mr. Balmaine."

"Is that the notable discovery?" said Alfred, amused as much by the remark as by the gravity and pomposity with which it was made.

"So much so that if the Hardys had always been strictly moral our esteemed friend Samuel would in all probability come into the Hardy fortune."

"I am thankful they were not, then. But do you really mean that the judgment of the court will be influenced by the condition of Calder morality more than half a century since? You are joking, Mr. Artful."

"I never joke, Mr. Balmaine," returned the old gentleman with some asperity. And he never did, intentionally. "What I mean is that two or three generations ago it was no uncommon practice at Calder for even respectable people not to marry until they began to have a family, and Warton has discovered that John Hardy was christened on the day his father and mother were married."

And the lawyer, after taking a pinch of snuff and wrinkling his parchment-like face into a self-complacent smile, blew into his pocket-handkerchief a blast of triumph.

"An interesting fact in the history of the Hardy family, I daresay," said Alfred, who was both puzzled and amused by these demonstrations; "but I really don't see what bearing it has on the case of Hardy *versus* Hardy."

"You really don't?"

"I really don't," repeated Alfred, trying his very hardest to think what the old fellow was driving at.

"I am surprised. I thought everybody was aware —don't you perceive, my dear sir, that the testator being illegitimate—a son of nobody—no Hardy, except his own lawful issue, could inherit a shilling of his money unless he had willed it to them, and of that there is no question. So let Saintly Samuel prove ever so conclusively that his John Hardy and our John Hardy are one and the same man, he cannot touch a farthing of the fortune. He and the other members of the Company are claiming as next-of-kin, and in the eye of the law a person of illegitimate birth has no kin but his own parents and his own children."

"So the Fortune Company are quite out of the running?"

"Quite, and serve them quite right."

A few weeks later Balmaine went to the Vice-Chancellor's Court to hear the delivery of his judgment. It was a long rigmarole, as judgments generally are. There were many things set forth in it with which the reader is already acquainted, and some which it would not interest him to know. The general conclusion of the whole matter was that, in the opinion of the court, neither party to the suit was entitled to the fortune. Whether the testator and John Hardy of Calder were one and the same person was not germane to the issue, inasmuch

as the John Hardy in question, being illegitimate, it was not in the nature of things that the Calder Hardys could be his next-of-kin or legal representatives. On the other hand, as the marriage of Philip Hardy and Vera Leonino had not been established to the satisfaction of the court, and as Philip Hardy not only left no will, but pre-deceased his father, the elder Hardy died practically intestate and without any issue who could inherit his fortune. For these reasons the estate would escheat to the Crown. The Vice-Chancellor came to this conclusion with regret. He regarded it as morally certain that Philip Hardy and Vera Leonino were legally married, a fact which he trusted that Mrs. Balmaine, with whom he expressed great sympathy, would, sooner or later, be able to establish to the satisfaction of that or some other court. He had no fault to find with the conduct of the testator's trustees; they had behaved admirably throughout, and their costs would be costs in the suit. As for the Calder Hardys, who, he understood, had formed a company for the prosecution of the claim, and with whom he had no sympathy whatever, he should decline to make an analogous order. As they had contested the proceedings, and failed to prove their case, they must themselves pay their costs.

"Is this what you expected?" asked Alfred of Artful as they left the court together.

"It was not possible to expect anything better.

And you heard what the Vice-Chancellor said, that he hoped your wife would be able to prove her father and mother's marriage."

"And in that case?"

"The Crown would have to disgorge."

"A disappointment for us," put in Warton, "but a terribly dry wipe for Saintly Sam. He holds nearly all the shares, which are now of course utterly worthless, and they say it will cost him ten thousand pounds in addition."

"Serve him right, serve the rascal right!" said Artful vindictively. "I wish it had cost him twenty thousand! But I don't despair, Mr. Balmaine; we may find those witnesses even yet."

CHAPTER XIX.

TROUBLES.

Despite the Vice-Chancellor's sympathy, and the faint hope held out by the old lawyer, Alfred and Vera regarded the fortune as irrevocably gone. They were agreed that though they would far rather it should revert to the Crown than go to Saintly Sam, they could put it to better use than either one or the other. But they were too happy and too much wrapped up in each other to let the loss trouble them. Vera laughingly declared that though she had lost her fortune she had found a perfect treasure of a husband, and so gained by the exchange; a compliment which Alfred answered by saying that he would infinitely rather have Vera without the millions than the millions without Vera. And so both were content. They had enough for their wants and enough is as good as a feast.

For a time all went well with the young couple. His study was her studio, and while he wrought with his pen she plied pencil and brush. As a rule, they worked silently, but now and again Vera would

ask her husband's opinion either on a sketch she had finished, or as to the meaning of an author whose work she was illustrating, and he, after putting the last touches to an article or an essay would read it aloud, and invite her criticism, which he often found both acute and suggestive. Then of an evening Cora or some other friend would drop in, or they would go out to a concert or the play, entertainments for which Alfred had occasionally an order from the paper, and at least once a week they paid a visit to some picture gallery.

Thus the Balmaines were as happy in their lives as they were prosperous in their circumstances; for prosperity, like poverty, depends less on the amount of a man's income than on the ratio between his wants and his means of gratifying them. To some people—the Leytons, for instance—the Balmaines' eight hundred a year or thereabouts would have seemed little better than nothing at all; for Alfred and Vera, though they had all they needed and lived refined lives, it was more than enough. Not that they were so imprudent as to spend the whole of it; he knew too well the value of money to be extravagant, and she had been bred to look on waste as a sin. In theory they limited their expenditure to four hundred a year, but in practice it came to somewhat more, for their rent was rather high, and they seemed never to have done paying rates and taxes. Moreover, Alfred had insured his life rather

heavily, and Vera would not have been happy if they had not spared something for the disinherited, to whom she herself now belonged. One way and another their outgoings were not much less than forty pounds a month; yet this being little more than half their estimated income, it never occurred to them that they were exceeding the bounds of prudence; and when Vera once dropped a hint to that effect, Alfred received it so ill that she did not venture to repeat the experiment. All went on well for a few months, and then the tide of prosperity began to ebb. The first check was Vera's illness. It was not a very serious illness, nor could the cause be considered as either abnormal or alarming, nevertheless it quite incapacitated her for work. The sketching and painting had to be given up, and they were poorer by the five or six guineas a week she had been earning. Yet even with this lessening of their resources—which they regarded, perhaps too hopefully, as only temporary—they were by no means badly off, as Alfred, whose reputation as a journalist was steadily growing, could now reckon his gains at nearly fifty pounds a month. But misfortune, says the proverb, never comes singly, and one day when Balmaine went to the office of the *Financial Guide*, which adjoined that of Mr. Wilkins', he was called in by the great financier and informed that the magazine was about to be given up. For his own part he was quite willing to go on,

believing that sooner or later it would become a paying concern; but the outgoings were heavy, the receipts almost *nil*, and his associates in the enterprise had resolved to drop it at the end of the current month. Mr. Wilkins was very sorry, and if he could throw anything in Balmaine's way he should only be too glad to do so.

Alfred said very little. He could not press the proprietors to go on losing their money for his benefit, but he went home with a heavy heart. At one stroke his income was diminished by two hundred a year; and as the furnishing and et ceteras had, as they pretty nearly always do, cost a good deal more than was expected, the young couple had very little beforehand. Well, he must work all the harder, and try to make up the deficit that way. When he told Cora what had happened, she insisted on dismissing one of their two servants and effecting other economies; for they now realized for the first time the extreme precariousness of their income, and Alfred asked himself in alarm what would become of them if he should fall ill, or lose his place on the *Day*. Cora was right, after all; they should have waited a little longer; and when he saw his wife, notwithstanding her sufferings, going about her household duties or bravely trying to resume her drawing, he reproached himself bitterly for the want of prudence and forethought which had landed them in such a strait.

After a while the *Day* began to make more demands on his time, and this, though gratifying as showing that the editor's confidence in him was unimpaired, left him little leisure for outside work, for he had to be absent from home the greater part of the day, sometimes nearly all night. One of the tasks assigned to him at this time was visiting the slums of London, and writing realistic descriptions of the lives and habits of the lower classes of the population. He was next dispatched, as special correspondent, to the Black Country, to report about a big strike, and remained there several weeks. He saved something on his allowance for expenses, but his income from all sources was reduced to little more than the salary he received from the paper, to which his time was now almost exclusively given. But though considerations connected with pounds, shillings and pence weighed heavily on his mind, Alfred's greatest anxiety was the necessity of leaving Vera so much by herself. It was, in truth, a weary time for the poor girl, and as she lay on her sofa in the little studio, listening to the patter of the rain against the windows, watching the stunted trees as they bent to the autumnal blast, or gazing blankly at a pea-soup fog, her thoughts would go back to *Canton Vaud si beau*, and the happy days she had spent on the shores of the lake and in the enchanted region of the Waadtland Alps. Would she ever see them again, those scenes endeared by so many

associations, and where nature, whatever might be her moods, was always either beautiful or grand? Alfred and she had talked of going to Switzerland the following summer and visiting together some of the places they knew so well and loved so much. But there was no chance of that now, for even if there were no other reason they could not afford the expense of the journey. And then she turned to reckoning, as she often did, how much it was costing them to live. Rent and rates ran away with two pounds a week—a great deal too much for their circumstances, but as they had unfortunately taken the house on a three years' agreement, there was no remedy readily apparent. That left four pounds for everything else, little enough, yet still sufficient with care to make both ends meet, especially while Alfred was away, for she had a very poor appetite, and her maid-of-all-work was fortunately not a big eater. Poor Alfred! how hard he had to work and how worn he was beginning to look. If she could only help him more! But she could do nothing—nothing, except lie wearily on the sofa, and drag herself sometimes to the kitchen to see what Mary was doing. For the first time Vera regretted the loss of her fortune, and appreciated the advantages of wealth. A hundredth part of the income which she once thought her own and was now wrongly withheld from her, would not alone free them from anxiety, it would set them at ease—make them rich. Yet three

hundred a year was by no means a bad income. How many were there whom it would make happy; who would regard it as positive affluence. And Vera had a vision of a little châlet in some mountain valley, watered by a snow-born stream, and commanding a view over a blue lake and white-browed Alps, herself dividing her time between her diary and her easel, and Alfred writing articles for the *Day*, or still better, a book which should bring him honour and reward. With three hundred a year on which they could depend this might be done, and she would not ask for more. Even as matters stood, if they could depend on their present income there would be no reason for despondency, but both Alfred and herself were continually haunted by the fear that this, too, might take to itself wings and fly away. And then —no, she would not anticipate anything so dreadful; she would try as her husband, in the letter she had that morning received from him advised, to be patient, and hope for the best. Anxiety, weakness and indisposition, had for the moment dulled, if they had not quenched, her enthusiasm in the cause of humanity. Her mind ran chiefly on matters connected with Alfred and herself, and the impending event which it was possible she might not survive; and she understood, as she had never understood before, how hard it is for people who have troubles of their own to give much heed to the troubles of others. The world's seeming selfishness is, in great

part, due to the engrossing nature of the struggle for existence in which the majority are engaged.

After a while, the big strike being over, Alfred, to Vera's great joy, came home. She was never unhappy when he was near. But she saw with concern that he was far from well, and on the day after his return he became so much worse that she insisted on sending for a doctor, who pronounced the illness to be typhoid fever, the seeds of which Alfred had brought with him from the Black Country. This was a terrible blow, and more than confirmed Vera's worst forebodings. She sent for Cora; and informed the manager of the *Day* of her husband's illness. Cora came at once and rendered all the help in her power; and the *Day*, besides paying his full salary, made frequent inquiries about him. The fever, moreover, was not of a bad type. For all that, it was an anxious time, and Alfred had no sooner been pronounced out of danger than Vera became the mother of a little boy. She got well over her trouble, but her gladness was turned into sorrow when she learnt that her baby was so weak —owing, as the doctor thought, to her anxieties and exertions during Alfred's illness—that it was hardly possible for him to live more than a few days or weeks. Nor did he. After a brief struggle the flickering lamp went out, and Vera, with bitter tears and an aching heart, saw her first-born taken away to be laid in the cold ground.

But her grief was lightened by her husband's loving sympathy; his rapid recovery removed a great weight from her mind, and she found further solace in the resumption of her artistic work. And she resumed it none too soon, for their savings were quite exhausted, and they were now entirely dependent on the weekly remittance from the office of the *Day*.

CHAPTER XX.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

When Balmaine reported himself at the office as fit for duty the Franco-German war had been going on several months, the siege of Paris was drawing to a close, and Mr. Nonpareil, after congratulating him on his recovery, warned him to be in readiness to proceed to the French capital the moment it should be open.

The *Day's* correspondents had stuck to their posts during the siege, and sent many communications by the pigeon express ; but one had fallen seriously ill, and the other was so weakened by privation that both would have to be relieved, and Alfred, with two other members of the staff, had been appointed to take their places—for how long they had no idea. His two colleagues would look after political matters, while to him was assigned the special duty of going about the city, describing its appearance after the bombardment, and the condition and temper of the populace. It was the duty he would himself have chosen, and he rightly took the appointment as a decided compliment and an acknowledgment that

his previous services had given satisfaction to the proprietors of the paper. His salary was also raised, but as he had to defray out of it his personal expenses in Paris, the increase did not add materially to his means. But it was a step in the right direction, and he felt that his prospects were again improving. The only drawback was the necessity of leaving Vera in London, for as the new appointment might not be permanent it would have been imprudent for him to take her with him, even had peace been definitively concluded.

Vera, however, though greatly pleased with her husband's promotion, did not much like the idea of his going to Paris so soon after the siege. She feared that he was running into danger; but Alfred reassured her by pointing out that, as the city had capitulated, and the Germans held it at their mercy, there was no chance of a renewal of hostilities, and that a stay there involved little if any more risk than a stay in London. It was arranged that Cora should be her guest during his absence; so Vera would not be alone, and he left home with a comparatively easy mind.

"Where are you going to put up, Balmaine?" asked one of his *Day* friends, as he was on the point of starting.

"I have no idea. Can you recommend me a place?"

"I can, if you want to get really into the heart

of Paris. There is a little hotel in the Quartier Latin—if it has not been smashed by a Prussian shell—that I think would be just the thing. I once stayed there a few weeks and found it very comfortable. But it is a Bohemian sort of place, I must tell you, and you are not likely to meet any English there."

"So much the better. What is it called?"

"Hôtel des Miracles, Rue des Apôtres, kept by Madame Veuve Merveille."

"Thanks, I will go there," answered Balmaine, making a mem. in his note-book.

"Make my *amitiés* to Madame Merveille—if the Prussians have left her alive," said the other, who had a mortal hatred of everything German. "Tell her I sent you, and she will treat you well."

Balmaine arrived at Paris with the first train of provisions for the famished inhabitants, and witnessed and described their distribution and some other scenes; and he had good reason to believe that his letters and despatches gave satisfaction to the conductors of the *Day*, and were read with interest by its readers. But he had soon still more stirring incidents to describe—the Communist rising and the second siege of Paris. At first he rather sympathised with the movement. Among the leaders were men whose sole aim was the good of their kind, and who would gladly have sacrificed their lives if thereby they might establish that

ideal justice for which the noblest spirits of all ages have yearned and striven. Their principles may be summed up in the memorable words uttered nearly nineteen centuries ago, "Peace on earth and good will to men." Nor were their demands unreasonable; and if the Versailles government had shown more forbearance and discretion at the outset the horrors that afterwards came to pass might have been avoided. But when the scum of Paris rose to the surface, and the Communist Council began to vote decrees for closing churches, proscribing priests, and forcing capitalists to "disgorge," all chance of success or a peaceful termination of the strife vanished. The Commune had signed its death-warrant, and its overthrow became only a question of time.

Whoever, like Balmaine, saw Paris under the Red Flag must have afterwards found any stage burlesque tame in comparison. Louise Michel took possession of the pulpit of St. Eustache, where she shrieked lectures on the rights of women, and showered denunciations on the wretches of the bourgeoisie. Another creature set up as a priestess in the cathedral of Notre Dame. Citoyen Eudes and a gang of loose women, decked with red ribbons and adorned with crosses, held high revelry in the Palace of the Legion of honour, while the Tuileries, the Elysée, and other Government buildings were filled from night to morning and

from morning to night with drunken ruffians in much braided tunics and broad sashes, who smoked, played cards, and sent out squads of soldiers to requisition wine from the cellars of private houses, whose owners had fled in affright from the doomed city.

All this Balmaine described in letters that, despite the prevailing disorder, he found no difficulty in dispatching. But in order to obtain materials for his correspondence he had to move continually about, and was several times in great danger. Once he was impressed, forced to shoulder a musket, and take part in a skirmish. He might, of course, have refused, but only at the price of his liberty or his life, while by pretending compliance he contrived to get away without much trouble. On another occasion he had the alternative offered him of working all night at a barricade or being marched off to prison. He wisely preferred the former, and at daybreak the commander gave him a breakfast and let him go. When he related this adventure to Madame Merveille, who, since she knew he had left a young wife in London, took a warm interest in his welfare, she besought him to stay at home.

"You never go out," she said, "that I do not fear you will never return. One of these days that *canaille* will kill you, as they killed the poor Archbishop. If only for the sake of Madame your

wife, the beautiful lady so *gentile*, whose portrait you have shown me, you should be prudent."

Alfred explained that if he were to remain all day in the Rue des Apôtres he would be unable to find matter for his correspondence.

"Yes, the Rue des Apôtres is very tranquil, fortunately; but I fear we shall have bad work even here before this is over. I hope monsieur will never have to put the street in one of his dispatches," observed the landlady with uneasy foreboding.

And then she asked Balmaine whether he had any friends among the Communards.

"Not one. Why do you ask?"

"They might be useful; they could give you protection. If you only knew Monsieur Corfe now!"

"Corfe, Corfe! what Corfe?" said Balmaine, unpleasantly surprised by the mention of his enemy's name.

"An English gentleman who once lodged here, and, I'm sorry to say, has joined the Commune. He is an officer, and has great power, and they say —though that is quite *entre-nous*—that he has made a nice little harvest. Now if Monsieur only knew Monsieur Corfe——"

"Know him? Perhaps I do. What is he like, Madame Merveille?"

"Tall, brown hair, hard grey eyes, thin lips,

haughty in manner and hasty in temper, carries himself like *un ancien militaire.*"

"The same," said Balmaine thoughtfully. He was asking himself what would happen if Corfe and he should meet, for just then the leaders of the Commune could do pretty much as they liked. "Yes, I think I know this Monsieur Corfe, or, rather, I did know him."

"Monsieur and he are not friends then?"

"Not precisely."

"Then I should still more advise Monsieur to stay altogether in the house and keep as quiet as he can. It is not well to have a chief of the Commune for one's enemy."

But Balmaine could not have reconciled the acceptance of Madame Merveille's counsel with the faithful discharge of his duty, even if he had been disposed to take the course she suggested. On the other hand, he could not hide from himself that the danger was a very real one, and he had a strong feeling that sooner or later he and Corfe would cross each other's paths. It was a danger, moreover, against which he had no means of guarding. All he could do was to trust in God and keep his powder dry. He had got the better of this man hitherto, and he hoped to be equally fortunate if they should meet again.

The event which Balmaine foresaw and, to tell the truth, rather feared, was not long in coming to pass.

Going one evening from the Hôtel des Miracles to the office of the *Day*, on the opposite side of the Seine, he had to pass by, or rather through, a company of the Communard soldiers, *en bivouac* near the Tuileries.

"*Ma foi*," exclaimed one of them, "that *gaillard* cannot be French; he has not the air."

"Perhaps he is a Prussian," suggested a second.

"Yes, a Prussian spy," hissed a third; "he looks like one."

"*Sacr-r-ré nom de dieu*, let us arrest him," shouted a fourth.

The next moment Balmaine was the centre of a ring of bayonets, and it is no imputation on his courage to say that he broke into a cold sweat and wished he was well out of the difficulty. The proximity of lethal weapons to your person can hardly, in any circumstances, be productive of pleasurable sensations. Alfred suspected, moreover, that the Cummunard muskets were loaded, and the unkempt *sans-culottes* around him looked as if they would no more hesitate to draw a trigger than to drain a wine-cup. But the very extremity of his peril restored his courage, and the moment he realised his position he recovered his presence of mind.

"What does all this mean?" he asked quietly. "You are mistaken; I am no Prussian."

"Who are you then?" asked one who appeared to be in authority.

Balmaine told them his name and calling, and in proof of his statements showed papers and letters, but as his captors knew no language but their own these were of no avail. Then he produced his address card, whereupon the man in authority observed that a card was no proof of identity or good faith, and it would be quite like a Prussian spy to provide himself with a false name and a forged card.

"What shall we do with him then?" asked a fellow with a red beard and a ferocious face, glancing significantly at his chassepot and approaching his bayonet to the small of Alfred's back.

"*Tais-toi, Jules,* I reflect," said the officer. "Yes," after a pause, "that will do. Where is the *Diable-boiteux?* I saw him about just now."

"Behold him, Citizen Captain," pointing to a group close by.

"Good. Make *le Diable-boiteux* advance. He knows the English, he shall interrogate the prisoner."

Why the Communard in question should bear such a name as this was not very apparent, for he was a stalwart, clean-limbed fellow, with a strong squint, and as much hair on his head and face as would have stocked a wig-maker's shop.

"Here's a suspected spy, Boiteux, who protests he

is English, said the officer, "interrogate the *drôle* in his own tongue, and tell us what you think."

"Perfectly, Citizen Captain," answered the Devil-on-two-sticks, and leaning his hands on his piece his fiendship asked Balmaine a question in a language the like of which the latter had never heard before. It was no more English than Choctaw. Alfred could not understand a word of it. All the same, he listened attentively, and assuming that the fellow meant to ask who and what he was, answered accordingly, speaking slowly and clearly, so that if his questioner knew any English at all he might have no excuse for not understanding him.

But Boiteux evidently understood not a word, for turning to the officer he roundly declared that the prisoner was no more English than himself; and though ignorant of German he had heard it spoken in Alsace, and would take his oath that the prisoner was both a Prussian and a spy.

This declaration elicited a chorus of fierce execrations; the bayonets were thrust closer, and Alfred perceived that he was in a very awkward predicament. But whatever he may have felt he showed no sign of fear, and surprised his captors by the coolness of his bearing.

"Monsieur *le Diable* is quite mistaken," he began.

"No monsieurs here, if you please," growled one the Communards.

"Not even when speaking of his satanic majesty?" rejoined Alfred with a jocularity he was far from feeling.

"*Mille tonnerres*, that is worse; we will have no majesties, even in hell."

"Well, you look as if you ought to know," said Alfred, smiling.

This time the joke told, all burst into a laugh, and the situation became less strained.

"I was going to say," he went on, "that the Citizen Devil is quite mistaken. I have no doubt he knows English quite well, and can read it with ease, though his pronunciation leaves something to be desired, is in fact utterly incomprehensible. His accent has probably become rusty from disuse. Have you no officer who knows English? I would answer his questions with pleasure, and he could see at once that I am a true Englishman, and no spy."

"*Ma foi, oui*," said the man in authority, "we have such an officer, and the prisoner's proposal is reasonable. Take him to the commandant in the Place Vendôme. He has travelled and knows all the languages."

So Balmaine was marched off by his six captors—two before, two behind, and one on either side of him. Two would have been quite enough, but as they could not agree which two it should be, and all were curious as to the issue, perhaps anxious to be in at the death, all went, and Alfred had the honour

of being escorted by half-a-dozen Communards armed to the teeth, who, in the event of his failing to clear himself of the suspicion of being a Prussian spy, would, he felt assured, have the greatest possible pleasure in making a target of him.

When they reached the Place Vendome he was taken to a house at the door whereof two sentinels stood on guard, and on their errand being explained the party were ushered into a large room where several men sat writing.

"Citizen Commandant, behold a prisoner," said one of the six; "he has been denounced as a Prussian spy, but he professes to be an English journalist, and we have brought him here that you may interrogate him in his own tongue and ascertain the truth.

"What the devil brings you here, Balmaine? You are not in luck this time, anyhow."

At the same moment the speaker faced towards him, and Alfred, who had not previously caught sight of the man's face, saw that the Communard chief before whom he stood was Vernon Corfe.

CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE THE ENEMY.

ALFRED made no answer; he was praying heaven to steel his heart and sharpen his wits, for he foresaw that the struggle before him would be one of life and death. He was in the power of a man from whom he could expect neither justice nor mercy.

"What the devil brought you here, I say?" repeated Corfe angrily.

"Those men. You may be sure I did not come voluntarily."

"And what do you expect me to do with you?"

"Let me go. I have done no wrong, and as you well know, I am no spy."

"I know nothing of the sort. A sneak like you is capable of anything. As for wrong, you have wronged me in several ways, and it is with me you have to count, my fine Mr. Balmaine."

"Wronged you! How?"

"How? You know devilish well. You intrigued me out of my place on the *Helvetic News* and robbed me of the girl I was going to marry. What could you have done more?"

As Alfred's reply, if he had replied, would have been either scornful or indignant, he thought it better to hold his tongue.

"You don't answer. You acknowledge that you treated me ill. And you gained nothing by your treachery after all—nor she either. What a terrible sell it must have been for you, Balmaine, when you lost that lawsuit! But if Vera had married me she would have kept her fortune. I could put her in the way of getting it even now. What do you say to that, my fine fellow?"

Alfred, who naturally did not believe a word of this, still kept silence.

"How are you getting your living, Balmaine—still scribbling?"

"I am a journalist, and at present special correspondent of the *Day*."

"Well, I fear that by this time to-morrow the *Day* will have a correspondent the less. I wonder whether they would take me on in your place? I expect it is very nearly U P with this precious Commune. Do you know, I have only to say the word and those fellows will just take you outside and riddle you with bullets, or run you through with their bayonets?"

"I know."

"'Pon my word, you are very cool about it. If you think I am not in earnest you are deucedly mistaken. However, I will give you one more chance

for your life. Write down on this sheet of paper that you pretended to be my friend in order to deceive me, and persuaded Miss Hardy to marry you by telling her a pack of lies—and I will let you go."

"I prefer to die," said Alfred with assumed coolness, for his thoughts were of Vera, and his heart was well-nigh bursting with suppressed emotion. But even to save his life and see her again he would not put his name to a lie. He could see, too, that whatever he might say or do, however he might abase himself, his doom, so far as it depended on Corfe, was sealed.

"Die and be d——d, then," exclaimed Corfe in a rage. "Look here, citizen soldiers!" addressing the escort. "I know something about this fellow. His capture does credit to your discrimination, for beyond all doubt he is a Prussian."

"*Mille tonnerres*! Shall we!——"

"Wait a minute. You cannot kill a man for being a Prussian—that is a mere accident of birth; the proceeding would be highly undemocratic. But I have not the least doubt that the prisoner is a spy. His answers are unsatisfactory, the papers found in his possession compromising. I know his antecedents, too, and they are bad. He was a spy of the Prussian police in Geneva."

"You lie!" exclaimed Balmaine, unable any longer to restrain his indignation. "It is you were a spy in the service of the French Government. I

am a British subject, as I can at once prove, if you will conduct me either to the office of the *Day* in the Rue Scribe, or to the Hôtel des Miracles, Rue des Apôtres; and I warn you, Corfe, and all here present, that if you harm me it will be at your peril."

"You are a fool, Balmaine," hissed Corfe savagely. "What use is it to talk of peril to men compromised and desperate as these are? Do you think they stand in awe of your Government, or care a button-top whose subject you are? Take the *mouchard* away, my braves, shoot him on the Trocadero, and throw his carcase into the river."

"*Allons*, said the chief man of the six, who seemed to be a corporal, taking Balmaine by the arm; "we will soon dispose of this *gaillard*."

"No, don't do that, exclaimed Corfe with a sardonic glance at his victim. "Better take him to the police station in the Rue de Rivoli while I make some further inquiries. But be sure of this; if you do not hear from me to the contrary before eight o'clock in the morning give him the *coup de grace*."

"As you will, Citizen Commandant," began the corporal; "but I should think——"

"Let him have some supper and supply him with writing materials. He may want to write to his wife. Give her my kind regards, Balmaine. I hope you will remember me in your will, and that you are properly grateful for the respite I have granted you."

"I might be if I did not guess your motive—murderer, coward, and thief as you are! And I am not your first victim. You killed Esther Brandon on the Mer de Glace, and sooner or later retribution will overtake you."

At the mention of this name Corfe turned perfectly livid with fear and rage, and fell back in his chair as if he had received a blow.

"Take him away," he shouted hoarsely; take the *mouchard* away and shoot him to-morrow morning like a dog."

A few minutes later Balmaine was thrust into a small room at the *post* in the Rue de Rivoli and left to his thoughts. The room contained a chair, a table, and a truckle-bed; the windows were strongly barred, a sentinel stood on guard at the door, and at least a score of armed communards were loitering about the building. Escape seemed to be out of the question. Nevertheless, Alfred did not despair; life is sweet, and both for his own sake and for Vera's he was resolved to spare no effort to get out of Corfe's clutches. To this end it was imperative to keep up both his spirits and his strength; so after demanding writing materials, he asked for supper and a bottle of wine. These latter being dispatched, he wrote a letter to his principal colleague at the office of the *Day*, telling him what had happened, and that unless prompt measures were taken he should certainly be shot the next morning at eight

o'clock. If he could get this letter into the hands of his friend Laurence, he knew that every possible effort would be made to save him. Then he wrote to Cora, telling her also what had come to pass, and asking her to break the news of his death to Vera with all gentleness.

This letter he enclosed in the one to Laurence, with strict injunctions to forward it only in the event of his murder being accomplished.

But how should he get Laurence's letter to its destination? There was only one way—by stratagem and bribery. The sentinel who had obtained him his supper and his writing materials had a good-natured face, and might possibly be persuaded to act as his messenger.

"How soon will you be relieved?" asked Alfred through the keyhole.

"In an hour."

"That is to say at ten o'clock."

"Precisely."

"Good. Would you like to earn two hundred francs, and do an act of kindness at the same time?"

"If Monsieur—I mean if the Citizen Prisoner will tell me how, I shall be delighted to oblige him."

"You have only to take this letter, which I am pushing under the door, to the Rue Scribe and the *destinataire*, M. Laurence, will give you the money. As you will see, I have written outside, 'Two

hundred francs to be given to the messenger who shall deliver this letter as addressed, before midnight.' I have said before midnight, but the sooner the better."

"*Parfaitement, Monsieur le Prisonnier*—I have not the advantage of knowing your name—your commission shall be executed and the letter delivered before eleven."

This done, Alfred lay down on his truckle-bed, so utterly worn out with the fatigues of the day and the emotions of the last few hours, that, despite the perils that threatened him, he slept well and did not awake until the clocks were striking five. For a minute or two he neither remembered where he was nor what had happened, and only when he saw the first light of dawn struggling feebly through the grated window, and heard the measured tread of the sentry in the street, did he realise his position.

Five o'clock! In three hours—unless the soldier had delivered his letter and Laurence succeeded in obtaining an order for his release—he would be lying stark and stiff on the Trocadéro. And it seemed to him now that the chances in his favour were much less than he had thought them the night before. The man might not have delivered the letter, after all. Laurence might have failed to convince the Communard leaders of his innocence, and procure a respite, for just then, while the enemy's shells were hurtling through the air and

death and destruction stared them in the face, the rebels could be in no merciful mood. But in any case Laurence would surely come to see him, if only to say that he had failed, and to bid him a final farewell—supposing he had got the letter! And if he had got the letter he would have been there already, or, at least, have sent some message. No friend in such circumstances could do less.

No, the letter had not been delivered; and as the clocks went six Alfred threw himself on his bed with a shudder. He was beginning to lose courage. It is hard for a man in the prime of life and the fulness of his strength to walk through the dark valley and die in cold blood an ignominious death at the hands of men he never harmed, away from those he loves, sustained neither by a hope of posthumous fame nor the consciousness that he is sacrificing his life at the call of duty, or for the good of his kind. How little, how utterly insignificant appeared the trials he had lately undergone as compared with this crowning calamity! Poor Vera! what would become of her? And then he bowed his head, and prayed both for her and himself, that God, who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, would comfort his desolate wife and give him courage to die as a Christian gentleman should.

Seven o'clock! Balmaine was already up and dressed; but he now threw off his clothes and lying down made as if he were asleep. There was still a

chance that Laurence might come, and he resolved to delay his departure from the *post* to the latest possible moment.

At half-past seven the door opened and the Communard corporal entered the cell, and placing his heavy hand on Alfred's shoulder shook him roughly.

"Waken up! It is time. *Milles tonnerres!* for one who is going to be shot in half an hour you sleep soundly, young man. It is time, I say."

"Time for what?" said Alfred drowsily, and putting on a surprised look.

"*Ma foi*, time to die. You know what the citizen commandant said: eight o'clock at the Trocadéro."

"No he did not. He said you had to keep me at the *post* until eight o'clock. Besides, I must have time to dress and take my breakfast."

"Dress then, and quickly. But as for breakfast —well, yes, I will order you some. It might be bad for your digestion to die on an empty stomach. Ah! ah!"

And the fellow laughed consumedly.

Have you any money?"

Balmaine gave him a five-franc piece.

"Here, Victor, fetch the prisoner some breakfast and a bottle of wine at twenty sous."

"Two; one for yourself."

"Thank you much. Bring two bottles, Victor."

"It was half-past eight before Balmaine had finished his breakfast, and the corporal, besides emptying his own bottle, drank the greater part of Alfred's. But by this time the man's comrades were getting angrily impatient, and the under-officer declared that he could allow no further delay. They must march at once.

Alfred walked slowly, almost automatically, feeling like a man in a dream, yet continually on the alert, for Laurence might come to the *post* at the last moment and reach the Trocadéro in time to save him.

As the escort neared their destination, they met two well-dressed men, proceeding in the opposite direction. The strangers looked at Balmaine pityingly, and he at them with languid curiosity; but the next moment his face brightened with new-born hope, and springing forward with an eager gesture, he shouted:—

"Senarclens, Senarclens, Monsieur Senarclens, dear friend, save me! These men are going to shoot me on suspicion of being a Prussian spy. You can tell them who I am, that I am neither a Prussian nor a spy."

"But it is not possible," exclaimed the startled historian, with a look of horrified surprise. "These are honest citizens, they would not put to death an innocent man. This gentleman is Alfred Balmaine, my particular friend; he is the husband of a lady

who is as dear to me as my own daughter, and no more a Prussian spy than I am. You must let him go, my friends."

This the corporal refused to do, albeit he was evidently very much impressed by what he had heard.

Commandant Corfe, he said, had pronounced the prisoner to be a spy and ordered him to be shot on the Trocadéro at eight o'clock.

"Yes," put in Alfred, "it is Corfe's doing."

And then he told M. Senarclens how it had all come about.

"You must not shoot this man," said Senarclens sternly. "It would be a most shameful murder. Do you know who I am? My name is Senarclens."

The corporal doffed his hat.

All the world, he said, knew the name of Citizen Senarclens. Was it not one of the glories of France? He should be only too happy to comply with his request, only Citizen Corfe——"

"Never mind Citizen Corfe. I will take the responsibility. Be good enough to let my friend go."

The corporal still refused; but after a little hesitation he agreed to reconduct Balmaine to the police station in the Rue de Rivoli and keep him there while Senarclens procured an official order for his release. The historian took Alfred's arm, the six soldiers marching respectfully behind. As they came within sight of the post a fiacre was driven in

hot haste to the door, and out of it stepped a man pale with excitement, who, when he perceived Balmaine, ran towards him with outstretched hand.

"Thank God, I am in time!" he exclaimed fervently; "I was beginning to fear the worst."

"And the worst would have happened if it had not been for M. Senarclens. It is to him I owe my life," said Alfred rather bitterly.

"I could not have done more had my own life been at stake, Balmaine. I only got your letter at four o'clock, and ever since I have been running about from pillar to post. I have not lost a moment. It is not ten minutes since I got the order for your release. Here it is!"

"You will let my friend go now?" said Senarclens, turning to the corporal.

"Certainly; the citizen who is not a Prussian spy is no longer my prisoner. He may go. *Au revoir*, citizen."

"You are very kind," replied Alfred grimly; "but everything considered, I think I would rather not see you again. *Adieu pour toujours*, Citizen Corporal."

CHAPTER XXII.

M. SENARCLENS IS DISCOURAGED.

THE historian invited Balmaine to walk with him towards his lodgings in the Hausmann boulevard. He seemed much depressed. When he heard of the Communard rising he had hurried to Paris, full of enthusiasm, and firmly believing that a new era had begun, that a socialist republic was being organized which would regenerate France and confer on humanity at large untold blessings. Only a few years, and wars, inequalities, and poverty would cease, Europe become a happy family, and perfect justice be everywhere established. And what did he see? Violent dissensions among the reformers themselves, the usurpation of power by unscrupulous factions, spoliation and oppression, Paris begirt in a circle of fire, and his beloved France, still in possession of the foe, torn by intestine strife and bleeding at every pore.

"But it is not the fault of the socialists," said Senarclens. "If they had been more united among themselves, and Thiers were not such a wretched little despot, and the Versailles Government had

been less cruel and intolerant, and the Empire had not so completely brutalized the population of Paris, all might have gone well."

"If, if, if," repeated Alfred rather bitterly. "Why not say at once that if everybody was virtuous all would be happy? Do you not see, my dear M. Senarclens, that while brutality and ignorance, crime and intolerance prevail, they must be taken into account, and that so long as dissensions exist among communists themselves, you cannot expect brotherly love to reign in the world at large? Before they try to convince others, let them know their own minds. And I have the most profound distrust in these heroic remedies. I have lately seen a good deal of the poor of three countries—England, Italy, and France—and I am convinced that, though wise laws and efficient administration may effect some improvement in their lot, it is really nothing compared with what they could do for themselves. In other words, you cannot make people happy by Act of Parliament. Suppose, for instance, that the people of this country and of England could be persuaded to reduce their consumption of drink and tobacco by one half, and Christian countries were to disband their armies and refer the settlement of their disputes to a supreme international court, composed, let us say, of the wisest men and best legists of Europe and America? What a difference it would

make! The world would hardly know itself, so great would be the change! And I believe all this will come to pass, but only in one way—by the moral improvement of the masses."

"You do the masses injustice, M. Balmaine; it is not they alone who are deficient; the upper classes are quite as ignorant, and still more selfish."

"As selfish, perhaps, yet hardly as ignorant. But never mind that. I was about to say that real progress can be achieved only by improving the *morale* and raising the ideals of all—gentle and simple, rich and poor—by evolution, in fact, not by revolution. And the process is going on, has been going on for ages. I have no objection to socialism. I dare say it will come in its own time; but it must come gradually, and be adopted spontaneously, and, as nearly as possible, unanimously. A majority could no more force socialism on a minority than it could force on them moderation in eating or personal cleanliness. At least that is my opinion."

"You are for a policy of *laisser faire, laisser aller*, then? It is a policy that has failed M. Balmaine."

"It will be time to say so when the experiment has been tried, M. Senarclens. Anyhow the opposite system does not seem to answer here in France. The most complete *laisser faire* could not well produce much worse results than those we are now witnessing."

"Perhaps you are right," returned the historian mournfully. "I sometimes think we should be better without government of any sort. Yes, all this is sad and disheartening, and I begin to despair of the future of humanity."

"I do not think there is any reason to despair, M. Senarclens; failures always precede success, and enthusiasts are apt to forget that, so long as men are fallible, and mortality and toil are conditions of existence, sorrow and suffering cannot be banished from this world of ours, which for many must always be a vale of tears. We may prolong life but we cannot conquer death."

"You mean," said the historian, smiling, "that though we may mend we shall never become perfect."

"Exactly."

"In that I quite agree with you. But at any rate let us try to mend, and each in his own sphere do something to make the world a little better than he found it. We shall then prepare the way for the reign of that ideal justice which men have so long desired, and which still seems so far off."

And then, after a few more words, they separated, not to meet again until both had undergone some further strange experiences.

As Alfred, after calling at the office of the paper, was making for his lodgings he encountered a detachment of weary and depressed-looking com-

munards, part of a force which had just been defeated close to one of the barriers.

The siege was growing hotter and hotter; an assault might be delivered at any moment, yet there was no sign of yielding, and the besieged were making preparations for a desperate resistance in the very heart of Paris. Barricades were being erected and buildings fortified in every direction, and when Balmaine reached the Rue des Apôtres he found it swarming with insurgents and blocked at both extremities. But on showing a passport with which he had provided himself at the office he was allowed to pass. Poor Madame Merveille was in a state of great agitation and distress. Nearly all her lodgers had bolted, she had feared that Balmaine was killed, and was in mortal terror lest her house should be crushed by shells or set on fire by the rebels. For all that, she was determined to stand by her property to the last. If the worst came to the worst she would shut herself up in the cellar, where she had placed a store of provisions sufficient for several days. When she knew that Alfred did not mean to run away like the rest, she fairly hugged him; put her hands on his shoulders, and kissing him on both cheeks declared that she should not charge him another centime. So long as he remained in Paris he might live at free quarters in the Hotel des Miracles.

A few days later the Versailles troops were inside

and the street fighting began. The events that followed are amongst the most terrible that ever befell, even in the bloodstained history of Paris. Balmaine witnessed scenes that burnt themselves ineffaceably into his soul, and made him, like M. Senarclens, almost despair of mankind.

In some of the streets dead bodies were as numerous as autumnal leaves in a country lane; pools of blood as frequent as pools of water after a storm. From La Roquette to Père la Chaise human carcases lay as thick as the bodies of slaughtered pheasants after a great battue. Horrible as were the excesses perpetrated by the communards, the atrocities committed by the troops were still more ruthless. To insurgents captured in fight no quarter was given. Prisoners were sorted; those with blackened hands, or shoulders which appeared to have been bruised with the recoil of muskets, were shot without mercy. The others were reserved for execution later on, or transportation to Cayenne. No consideration was shown either for age or sex. The mere suspicion of being a communard, above all a *petroleuse*, was equivalent to a sentence of death without inquiry or trial.

One day, while Alfred was watching from the Place de la Concorde the fires in which the doomed city was wrapped, he saw coming towards him a crowd of howling demoniacs, half-carrying, half-pushing along what at first sight looked like a

bundle of rags. The bundle of rags was a woman, limp, helpless, and nearly unconscious; her dress in tatters, her hair dishevelled, and her white blood-stained face agonized with fear.

"*La petroleuse! la petroleuse!*" yelled the crowd, and as they reached the point where Balmaine stood an officer stepped forward and, drawing his revolver, blew out the wretched creature's brains.

Balmaine took the trouble to inquire, but cautiously, lest he should draw on himself suspicion of being a communard, how it was known that the woman was a *petroleuse*—on whose evidence she was accused. But nobody could tell him. *On le dit*, was the only answer he received.

One of the last fights that took place was in the neighbourhood of the Hôtel des Apôtres. As all the lodgers had fled, and Madame Merveille was hidden in the cellar, the correspondent of the *Day* had the house all to himself, and he watched the operations partly from an upper window, partly from the *porte cochère* between the tobacco-shop and the hotel. He saw the first attack on the nearest barricade, led by a plucky little officer with a walking-stick, who at the first volley bounded into the air with a scream and then fell flat on his face, stone dead. The insurgents contested the ground inch by inch, and repulsed the troops in the street over and over again. In the meantime, however, another detachment had entered the buildings on either

side, and, breaking with pickaxes and crowbars from house to house, they fired on the communards from the windows, and finally took the barricade in reverse.

Alfred, always on the outlook for incidents where with to enrich his correspondence, obtained permission to accompany one of these housebreaking parties; and exciting and perilous work it proved, though he took care to expose himself to no more danger than he could help. To make a hole in a wall big enough to admit a man was generally an affair of a few minutes, whereupon the soldiers would rush through and begin shooting from the windows or, as happened more than once, descend into the street, and engage in a hand-to-hand struggle with the rebels, who, taken between two fires, and knowing that no mercy would be shown them, fought with the ferocity of despair. At length, as the night was closing on the murderous scene, they were driven—the few who remained alive—into the very centre of the Rue des Apôtres, and close to the Hôtel des Miracles.

And now the end of the struggle is at hand. The soldiers (whose movements Balmaine is following) have reached the house contiguous to the wine-shop, next door to the hotel. They are in a large room in the third story, and while one party is firing from the windows a second is breaking through the next wall. The air is thick with lime-dust and

powder-smoke. Two or three wounded men are lying on the floor; every now and again a lump of ceiling, dislodged by a bullet, falls with a crash, and all in the room are as white as millers. A large building on the opposite side of the street is on fire, and the flames throw a lurid light on the fierce, ghastly faces of the fighters, all of them damp with sweat, and some of them streaked with blood.

"*En avant, mes enfants!*" shouts the captain, who is standing, sword in hand, near Balmaine, as a big stone is knocked out of the breach in the wall, now wide enough to admit two men abreast. "Six of you to the windows; the rest follow me into the street, and at them with the bayonet." As the captain speaks he makes for the hole, his men, among whom is Balmaine, crowding after him. "Ah! who is that? After him, men! after him!"

A man, who seems to have sprung out of the adjoining room, is rushing madly up-stairs, three steps at a stride. The next moment a soldier has him by the heels; he is dragged down in a trice, the captain seizes him by the coat-collar and, shortening his sword, prepares to plunge it into his throat. At the same instant a great sheet of flame from the burning house flares into the sky, and in the writhing and terror stricken prisoner before him, disguised though he is, Balmaine recognises his erstwhile friend and would-be murderer, Vernon Corfe.

"You are mistaken, you are mistaken!" he screams, putting up his hands to ward off the impending stroke. "I am not a communard; I was escaping from them; I am an Englishman; and that gentleman there—that gentleman knows me and can tell you that I speak the truth. For God's sake save me, Balmaine! It will be worth your while."

Alfred, it need hardly be said, bore Corfe no goodwill, nor was he a sufficiently advanced Christian to return good for evil. A few days previously he would probably not have raised a finger to save the murderer from the doom he so richly merited. But he had lately supped full of horrors, he was sickened with slaughter, and could not bear to see this man, murderer and traitor though he was, slain in cold blood before his eyes, if by a word he might obtain him a reprieve.

"Is this so?" asks the officer.

"It is. I know him, and, as he says, he is an Englishman."

"Has he been fighting at the barricades?"

"That I cannot tell you." Balmaine did not feel that he was called upon to save Corfe's life by telling a lie.

"His hands are clean," said the Captain, "and that is a good sign; but the circumstances are suspicious. I cannot let him go. He must be sent to the Bicêtre, and justice will decide his fate."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MESSAGE FROM CORFE.

A MONTH later Paris had almost resumed its ordinary aspect. True, the blackened ruins of the Hotel de Ville, the Tuileries, the Conseil d'Etat, and other buildings were there in grim evidence of the havoc so recently wrought by social hatred and civil strife; but the streets were thronged with passengers, most of the shops were reopened, and people went about their business as if nothing particular had happened. Now that matters were taking their regular course Balmaine had much less to do, and he was in daily expectation of being either recalled to London or sent farther afield. In the meantime he found the comparative calm a great boon, for the fatigues and excitement of the siege had told on his health. He felt and looked far from well, and was just about to apply for leave of absence to run over to London and spend a few days with Vera, when he received a letter from Corfe, of whom, since his arrest in the Rue des Apôtres, he had heard nothing. It was to this effect:

"I am condemned to death. I have done you all the harm I could, but for all that I entreat you to come and see me. I have an important communication to make.

"VERNON CORFE."

Balmaine did not much believe in the important communication, yet he resolved to visit his quondam rival, partly to see how this man, whose character interested him, met his doom—he had not shown much courage in the Rue des Miracles—partly with a view to obtaining matter for a letter—for your true journalist is always on the quest after effective "copy."

On presenting his card as correspondent of the *Day* he was courteously received by the Director of the prison, who made no difficulty about granting his request for an interview with Corfe.

If Alfred had expected his ancient enemy to show any signs of embarrassment he was mistaken. He found him in a small yet airy and comfortable cell, well supplied with books and writing materials. As his visitor, accompanied by a turnkey, entered, Corfe rose from his chair, bade Balmaine good day, and offered him a seat, quite in the old nonchalant style.

"Won't you sit down, Balmaine?" he said. "It is awfully good of you to come and see me, after all that has happened. Let me offer you a cigar. You will find them better than the Veveys and Grandsons

we used to smoke at Geneva. They let me smoke now that I am condemned; they would not before, and 'pon my word, to be deprived of tobacco is almost as bad as being sentenced to death."

But there was a nervous tremor about his lips and a hunted look in his eyes which showed he was far from being at ease, and that his words were braver than his heart. He was playing a part, and his insatiable vanity went far to supply the place of courage.

"You would be rather surprised to get my letter You had not heard, I suppose?"

"No; I had not heard."

"Well, I want you to do something for me; but in return I will do a good deal more for you."

"Yes," said Alfred quietly; "what is it?"

"Restore your wife's fortune."

"How?" exclaimed Balmaine, startled but incredulous, and expecting some trick.

"By giving you properly legalised copies of Philip Hardy and Vera Leonino's marriage certificates—a copy of those, I mean, that Hardy had in his possession before he died, and which he gave to Gabrielle Courbet to take to his father in England."

"How do you know he did this, and how came these documents into your hands?" asked Alfred, almost confounded by this revelation, which nevertheless seemed to bear the verisimilitude of truth.

"I will tell you." And with a self-satisfied air,

"I have a mother, Mr. Balmaine," said Corfe, dropping for the first time during the interview his cynical manner: "I have a mother, the only relative for whom I ever cared, and who has never treated me badly. My father is a hard, severe man, who used to punish me unmercifully, and, I believe, begrudged me the very bread I ate. But my mother was always good to me, she shielded me from his anger, and got me out of many a scrape. A few years ago, unknown to him, she gave me a large sum of money to save me from a great danger—never mind what. I promised to give it her back, and I have not been able to keep my word. My father has found it all out, and he is awfully savage, reproaching her always, and making life a burden to her. Now I should like her to have that money, and if I let you have these papers you must send it to her; that is my condition."

"You are not absolutely destitute of conscience after all, Corfe!"

"Of course I am not; what made you think so?" returned Corfe, with a look of injured innocence. "Well, how is it to be?"

"What is the amount?"

"A mere trifle; eight hundred pounds."

"It shall be done," said Alfred, after a moment's thought; "always provided, of course, that my wife recovers her fortune by means of these papers."

"Of course. That goes without saying. And

now I must tell you where they are. I made some money during the Commune, but lost it all in the crash, except two or three thousand francs, which, together with some private papers—those relating to the Hardy marriage among them—I hid in the house where I was lagged, and where I had gone for the purpose of getting them. They are in an oaken cupboard in a room on the fourth story, which I once occupied. You will easily find it; and I shall give you a letter to the proprietor, authorising you to take possession of my effects, though there is naught worth taking but the money and the papers, which, as I said, are hidden. The back of the cupboard is panelled, and all the panels are fastened with four nails, save one, which is fastened with five. Remove it, and behind you will find a recess in which is a little iron box. That box contains the papers and the bank notes. Destroy all the papers but those you want; they concern nobody but myself."

"And the bank notes?"

"Send them with the eight hundred pounds to my mother; say they were my last gift. And now I have a last request to make of you."

"And that is——"

"To come and see the last of me. I want you to be able to say that I died game. I am aware I did not appear to advantage in the Rue des Miracles; but I was taken by surprise, and, I admit it, got into a mortal funk—only for a minute,

though, as you no doubt noticed. You will come, of course?"

"It is a strange request, but I will do as you wish. When——"

"Have I to be shot? I have no idea; they do not let us know beforehand; in two or three days probably. The director will tell you. Must you go?"

"Yes," said Alfred, who had risen from his chair; "I cannot stay any longer. I have work to do."

Corfe tendered his hand. Balmaine drew back.

"What! you won't shake hands?" asked the prisoner.

"With you? Certainly not."

"You have got all you require, and now you want to insult me, I suppose. But you need not get on your high horse; my family is quite as good as yours, let me tell you."

"So much the worse for your family. I won't touch your hand, Corfe, because it is stained with blood. By a shameful fraud you deprived my wife of her fortune, you did your best to murder me; I firmly believe that you killed poor Esther Brandon, and you richly deserve the punishment you are about to receive."

With that Balmaine turned on his heel and left the cell. He never saw Corfe again. The director, of whom he inquired as to the time of execution, thought it would not take place until the following

week, and promised to let him know betimes. But peremptory orders came early next morning, and within an hour of their receipt the culprit was shot in the prison yard.

Corfe failed to make good his boast of "dying game," for though he struggled hard to keep up an appearance of composure, he completely broke down at the last moment, had to be dosed with brandy, supported to the place of execution between two warders, and propped in a fainting condition against the prison wall.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DISPOSAL OF THE FORTUNE.

"WHAT would you say, Vera," asked her husband, on the day after his return from Paris, "if I were to tell you that you are going to get your Two Millions after all?"

"I should say you were joking; would not you, Cora?"

"I am not sure. If Alfred says so I should think he is very likely to be right."

"Are you serious, *cher ami?*"

"Quite. I did not like to say anything until I had seen Mr. Artful. Well, I saw him this morning, and after hearing my statement, he said there was no doubt the fortune could be recovered; and I took the liberty of telling him to begin proceedings for its recovery forthwith. Did I do right, Vera *mia?*"

"Whatever you do is right for me, *mon maître*," said the young wife fondly; "but tell us all about it, please; we are both dying of curiosity."

Alfred told them all about it. The two women were so deeply interested in the story and so much

excited by the perils their husband and cousin had undergone, that the fortune question fell for a moment into the background.

"What an awful villain that man was!" said Cora, meaning Corfe; "it makes one's blood run cold to think of him."

"And he tried to have you shot!" said Vera, turning pale.

"And to marry you," said Balmaine.

"How do you account for the existence of such a monster of iniquity?"

"You might as well ask me how I account for the existence of evil. Yet I have no doubt there are many more like him—as vain, as devoid of moral principle, and as hard and cruel—as potentially bad though not actually so wicked. But there are, fortunately, few equally unscrupulous who have Corfe's gifts and education, and opportunities for evil. Those who have, become, like him, great criminals."

"And always come to a bad end, it is some satisfaction to know," put in Cora.

"Not always, I fear. If Corfe had not got mixed up with the Commune I do not see how he could have been brought to book for the crimes we know he committed. It is well he did, for a man of his capacity and moral callousness is more dangerous that a homicidal lunatic. But enough about Corfe. Do you think (smiling) the fortune will be too great a responsibility for you, Vera?"

"Not when you share it with me. But we must turn it to good account."

"How?" asked Cora, rather sarcastically. "I cannot conceive of anything more difficult than to dispense a large fortune judiciously—that is if you mean to give it away."

"But we don't. Vera and I have discussed the subject very often, and imagined what we should have done had the fortune come to her; and I think we are agreed that there are better ways of helping people than bestowing indiscriminate alms, subscribing to churches and the rest. We should give something for charitable purposes, of course—probably a good deal—but nothing is easier than to give money when you have plenty of it, and as often as not charity pauperises. I would rather try to prevent pauperism and help the poor without impairing their self-respect by making them recipients of relief."

"That is easier said than done."

"True. But few things worth doing are done easily. You will perhaps say that what one man can do is hardly worth mentioning—that it is only as a drop of water to the ocean. Well, the ocean is made up of drops after all; and if a sufficient number could be taken from it, even the volume of an ocean might be perceptibly diminished. From what I have lately seen, both in this country and others, I feel convinced that more good may be

effected by raising people's ideals, improving their morals—using the word in its widest application—and combating erroneous views than by mere doles, however carefully bestowed. For instance, if anybody could persuade the people of this country to lessen their expenditure on drink by five or ten millions a year, and eat—I exclude of course the indigent—a little more moderately, he would do more good than would be done if every millionaire in the land were to sell all he had and give it to the poor. Adam Smith, who was the first to show the errors of the protective system, and the men who brought about the repeal of the Corn Laws, did more to diminish the sum of human misery than all the philanthropists of the century."

"Very likely," put in Cora, "but what is the practical application? Adam Smiths are not to be bought to order, and there are no more Corn Laws to repeal."

"There are other bad laws to repeal though, and I only mentioned Adam Smith as an illustration of the idea I wanted to convey—that the greatest and noblest of all functions is that of the teacher; second to it is the work of those who devote themselves to the repetition and enforcement of the teacher's lessons; for of all evils ignorance is the greatest—if men were wiser they would be both better and better off."

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"You must have a newspaper, Alfred."

"I mean to have one if Vera will let me?"

"Allow you! Of course I will; but why do you ask?"

"Because my newspaper will not be a money-making concern. I shall not conduct it on commercial principles. It must be sold at a low price or it will not reach the classes whom I want most to influence; it must be well and brightly written, or it will not please my readers, and fearlessly written, without respect to persons and parties, or it will not please me. The columns of this paper will be open to all who have anything really good to say, and I shall pay my contributors handsomely, always on condition, however, that they sign their articles, for I will neither take the responsibility of other men's articles, nor ask them to suit their views to mine. And it is only right that the public should know who their self-appointed Mentors are. What should we think of a divine or a statesman who delivered his discourses with his features hidden under a mask? Anonymity is the journalist's mask, worn, moreover, not in his own interest but in that of his employer. A paper conducted on these principles would not be likely to pay pecuniarily, the more especially as I should neither humiliate myself by asking for advertisements nor stoop to obtain subscribers by pandering to the classes or flattering the masses. But other results

would come in turn; sooner or later the public would appreciate honesty of purpose and plainness of speaking. And if the enterprise should cost us a few thousands a year what then? The money would be better spent than in keeping up a big establishment, and Vera and I can live on far less than the interest of our income. And there are other ways in which we could dispose of money usefully, such as educating highly and providing for poor children of exceptional ability, organizing free lectures on practical subjects, and making an essay now and then towards the problem of housing the poor."

"I approve of all you propose, *mon ami*," said Vera thoughtfully; but could we not do something more immediate? It will be a very long time before the paper begins to tell, and making experiments about housing the poor will be a rather slow process, will it not? Could we not hit upon some idea that would be all our own?"

"An apt suggestion. Yes; I think I have an idea. It occurred to me a little while ago. When I was among the London poor, I noticed that they are very badly served by retail traders. Why should we not establish stores in some of the poorest districts of London, where the very poor could buy all they want at a moderate advance on

first cost? I would not give anything—for giving, like borrowing, dulls the edge of husbandry—so the scheme would have to be self-supporting, but by doing the business on an extensive scale, we could afford to supply genuine articles at much lower prices than are paid at present, and so place within the reach of the poor the advantages of co-operative trading—perhaps, in the end, by advancing the necessary capital—of course without interest—enable some of them to become their own providers. For of all helps, self-help is the best. Oh, there are many ways by which those who regard wealth as a trust, and not a right, may promote the common good. And it seems to me that it is simply a matter of duty on the part of the rich to spend the greater portion of their incomes in bettering the condition of the community which protects them in its enjoyment."

"And yet you say you are not a Socialist," said Cora.

"Nor am I, for I would constrain no man. The only force I desire to use is the force of public opinion, and it is public opinion which, Vera being willing, we will try to do our part in educating."

"With all my heart, *mon ami*. It is a noble aim and practical, not like some of those splendid yet impossible schemes M. Senarclens used to talk about."

"All very fine and Quixotic," observed Cora, smiling. "But you have not got your fortune yet. What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Cannot we go to Switzerland for a while?" said Vera; "this London air seems to suffocate me. I must see once more the mountain and the lake, and bask again in the sunshine of Canton Vaud *si beau*. The change would do us both good, Alfred. And we need not be idle. You could write articles for the *Day* and your new paper, and I would go on with my picture."

"Yes; let us go. Artful says it may be some little time before the proceedings for the recovery of the estate can be completed. We will sell this furniture, and give up the house—I think we are both pretty well tired of Park Village East—and betake ourselves to Switzerland until the business is arranged. We shall come back stronger for work. And I should like to see Milnthorpe and Delane. Perhaps we might find Delane a better place, or do something to enable him to marry Ida von Schmidt. I am sure they are desperately spoons on each other. If Cora will go with us as our guest and at our expense, it will add greatly to our pleasure. Won't it, Vera?"

"It will, indeed. Do come, Cora dear."

"With all my heart. Alfred's proposal is a piece of practical communism of which I highly approve. I wish more rich folks would do likewise, and treat

their less fortunate friends to Continental excursions rather oftener than they do at present. Educate public opinion on that point, cousin, and you will do a good thing. It is a capital beginning, and you may do the same thing next year if you are so disposed."

THE END.

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